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Inside the Controlled Chaos of an NFL Sideline

BY
MITCH GOLDICH
AND
CONOR ORR



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A lot more goes into a play like this than a perfect throw from Tua Tagovailoa and catch from Tyreek Hill; the Dolphins have a cast of staffers making it all work.

LINEUP

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LINEUP

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SCORECARD



ESSAY

The Time Is Now

AFTER DECADES OF MISGUIDED EFFORTS (AND BURNING BUSES), FORMULA ONE IS AT LAST MAKING A FOOTHOLD IN THE U.S.

► BY MARK BECHTEL

ONE COUNTRY hosting three Grands Prix in a season is rare in any case, but especially when that country is not known as a historical hotbed for Formula One. So having F1 come to Miami, Austin and Las Vegas this year as part of its 23-race, 20-country season is clearly a big deal. The rare triple speaks to the sport's desire to tap into a lucrative market, of course, but it's also a response to a newfound interest from American fans.

The U.S. actually hosted three events in a season once before, in 1982, but that was a very different point in both the history of the sport

and this country's relationship to it. The first of those U.S. races was on the streets of Long Beach. The second wound through downtown Detroit. The third was in the parking lot at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, a track with no long straightaways and countless tight turns, the only way to fit a 2.2-mile course in a 75-acre space. "It looks as if they brought a goat path down from the mountains and flattened it out," one Aussie driver grouched about the track. The circuit required near-constant braking and hard steering. "When my crew gave me a sign saying, '33 laps to go,' I nearly died," Nelson Piquet said shortly after collapsing following the end of the '81 race. "My head was already going out of the car. I couldn't hold it up against the centrifugal force."

In 1982 plans were made for another race, in New York, an event that ultimately fell through. So how did the U.S. come to occupy

such a substantial chunk of the F1 schedule that time around? Well, it just kind of . . . happened. "Formula One was never designed to have more than one race in this country," Bernie Ecclestone, the longtime F1 czar, said in '83. "The second U.S. race just came along, and the third and fourth races were accidental."

Indeed, there was little reason to expect it would be a happy accident. The U.S. and Formula One had—and, it turned out, would continue to have—a checkered relationship. For 11 years, beginning in 1950 (the inaugural F1 season), the Indy 500 was considered part of the championship, even though the cars were completely different and virtually no F1 drivers entered the race. That explains how '56 Indy winner Pat Flaherty finished fifth in the eight-event world drivers' championship without leaving the U.S.

After a pair of one-offs in Florida and California in 1959 and '60, the U.S. Grand Prix was given a permanent home in Watkins Glen, a hamlet in upstate New York that was relatively close to Woodstock in geography and even closer in spirit. The facility was known for the Bog, a muddy drainage area just outside the gates that made the Talladega infield look like finishing school. The favorite pastimes of its denizens were drinking, recreational drug use, casual vehicular theft and arson.

The 1974 race was the first that would decide the F1 championship ever held on American soil. A group of Brazilian fans chartered a Greyhound bus to go watch their countryman Emerson Fittipaldi attempt to win the title. The good news: Their man was victorious. The bad news: Their bus was stolen, driven to the Bog, pelted with rocks, doused with gasoline and set on fire. At 4 o'clock in the

AMERICAN DREAM

Verstappen, who comes to Vegas this month with the title sewn up, won both U.S. races last year, including in Austin (left).

afternoon. With their luggage still on board. “It’s really unusual that the bus was taken in broad daylight,” the local sheriff marveled. “The other [car] thefts took place at night.” (The Bog was eventually paved over, and the Glen hosted its last F1 event in ’80.)

Still, having a pivotal race overshadowed by rowdies was arguably better than the fate of the sparsely attended Phoenix Grand Prix,

FLAMING OUT

Neither the Brazilian fans’ bus nor the Caesars layout [being eyed by Paul Newman and Mario Andretti, opposite] marked a high point in U.S. Formula One history.

which came along after the demise of the other U.S. races. The course was set up on the downtown streets, which are laid out in a grid, making for a lot of 90-degree turns that must have had the drivers feeling like tourists looking for landmarks. (“City Hall? Sure, Mr. Prost. Left on 5th, right on Adams, right on 3rd. Can’t miss it.”) That unimaginative layout, plus a lack of seating, kept spectators away in droves. The first Phoenix event was held in 1988, and, by ’91, F1 (the cars’ top speed: 210 mph) was being outdrawn—handily—the same weekend by the races at a nearby ostrich festival (the birds’ top speed: 43 mph). Suffice to say, there was not a ’92 Grand Prix in Arizona.

When F1 returned to the U.S. in 2000, it wasn’t in a parking lot or a downtown area; it was at the most famous track in the country: Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Half of the circuit was on the infield road course, and the other half was Turn 1 and part of the frontstretch. The first race went off without a hitch. Afterward, Max Mosley, the president of FIA, the sport’s governing body, was asked about F1’s future in the U.S. “There’s not much doubt that [the race] will work,” he said. “The question is how many years it will take. In 20 years this will be a very,

booed and threw beer cans on the track. F1 honored its contract the next two years but hasn’t been back to the Brickyard since ’07.

But Mosley was on target in his broader assertion that F1 would, over time, build a base in the U.S. (even if Indy didn’t pan out). Here we are, two decades later, and the sport has never been more popular.

The great irony is that much of that American growth came during



very major event. The question is: Will it be a major event in five?”

The short-term prospects in the U.S. were even more precarious than Mosley imagined. The 2005 Indy race was arguably the most absurd in F1 history. The company that supplied tires to 14 of the 20 cars brought a product that could last only 10 laps at speed, so those teams dropped out after the parade lap, leaving six lonesome cars to circle the course as fans

a fallow period when Formula One didn’t run any races in the U.S. And when it did elect to return, in 2012, it did so in the relatively laid-back market of Austin, as opposed to a glitzy city like Miami or Vegas.

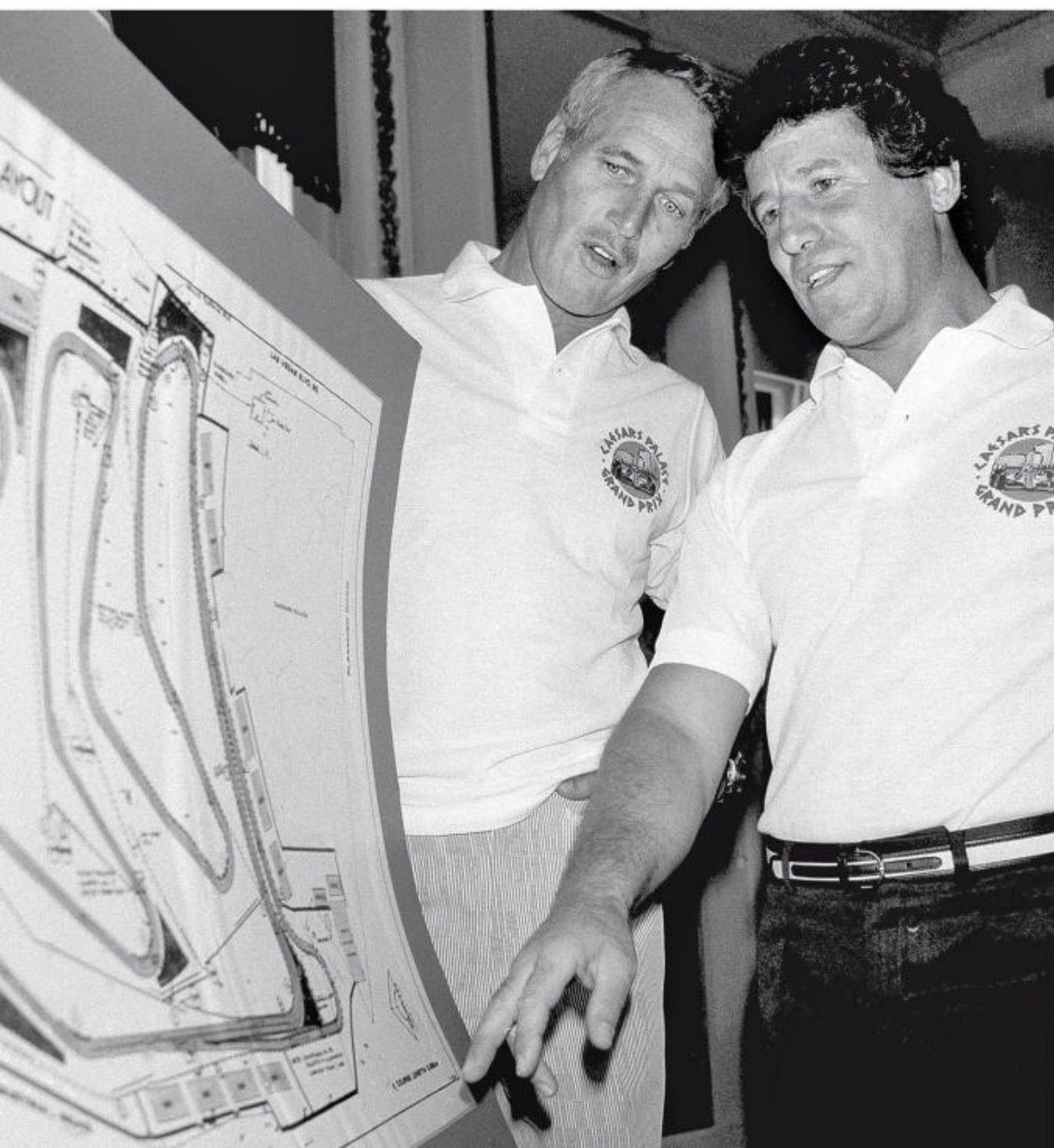
Of course F1 is a spectacle to behold, the dashing drivers, the sleek cars, the incredible wailing of the engines, the smell of the petrol, the use of fancy continental words like *petrol*. . . . For years, that formed the basis of F1’s misguided

strategy for gaining a foothold in this untapped market. But as was proved over and over in the preceding decades, the couple of weekends a year U.S. racing fans might trade their tallboys for champagne were ultimately fleeting. No, F1 started to become popular thanks to two transformative phenomena: social media and streaming TV.

A 1970s fan who might have been curious about, say, the gustatory

habits of Sir Jackie Stewart, had to glean what they could from the rare in-depth interviews or feature stories that came along. Now anyone who wants to know what Carlos Sainz's cheat meal is needs only type a few keys. (It's a burger.) Every team coaches its drivers on how to appear interesting (even if they're not) in fun social videos with their teammates for the simple reason that it works.

THE IRONY IS THAT MUCH OF F1'S AMERICAN GROWTH CAME DURING A PERIOD OF FEWER U.S. RACES.



And let's not discount the Netflix effect. Race ratings have risen dramatically since the 2019 debut of *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*. A few drivers have been critical of the series for playing up rivalries for the sake of drama. "I understand that it needs to be done to boost the popularity in America," said Max Verstappen in '21. To which F1 and Netflix would say, *Yeah, and your point is?*

F1 has also benefited from broader increased interest among Americans in global sports, with soccer leading the way. Who would have thought 20 years ago that the U.S. broadcast rights to the European soccer championship went for \$22 million more than golf's U.S. Open? Or that Barcelona jerseys would be as prominent as your local baseball team's? (Time to splash out on those cricket futures.)

And it isn't just that F1 has thrived in the U.S. by running fewer races. It can be argued that it has thrived because it ran fewer races. Luring half-interested fans to the track and trying to sell them on the concept smacks of giving away free amusement park tickets to trick visitors into hearing a time-share presentation. It's a recipe for a bad show, one that's as likely to turn fans off as win them over.

But Formula One finally figured out how—and why—to play the long game. The moment is right. The Miami race has become a magnet for big names, like Michelle Obama, Serena Williams and Brad Pitt. "People were waiting in front of the hotel," Verstappen said of last year's event. "Of course, we've had this already in European races, people trying to get pictures and stuff, but now you can really see the change in the U.S." The sport is here. And this time, no burning buses or speedy ostriches are going to change that. □



SCORECARD: Q&A

IRON IN THE FIRE

MIKE TYSON TOOK ON A NEW JOB: TRAINING A FORMER UFC CHAMP FOR HIS RING DEBUT

► BY JUSTIN BARRASSO

A FORMER CHAMPION is back in the boxing ring. Mike Tyson, now 57, trained Francis Ngannou ahead of his October bout with Tyson Fury. Before the fight, Iron Mike discussed how the sport continues to influence his life, whether he would have liked to compete in the Octagon and his connection with the 37-year-old Ngannou.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: Did you ever imagine that boxing could completely change your life?

MIKE TYSON: When I was a kid, I was poor. But you don't know you're poor when everyone around you is poor. Once I got in touch with [trainer] Cus D'Amato and got adapted to a new lifestyle, it started working. It was a process. It didn't happen overnight, but I realized I could be someone. That was from being around Cus.

SI: Did you enjoy the opportunity to help train Ngannou?

MT: The training process, it's reinvigorating. Fighting to reach a

new goal, I love that. That's what makes me hungry.

SI: You've been the world champ, and Ngannou was the UFC heavy-weight champion. But making a pro boxing debut against a WBC heavyweight champion was an extraordinarily difficult proposition. What impressed you most about his transition to the sport?

MT: Alexander the Great once said, "Impossible is nothing." Mike Tyson agrees. It's bigger than boxing. It's about humanity. [Ngannou] hit the lowest of lows; now he has the world in the palm of his hands.

SI: Francis's background is remarkable. As a boy in Cameroon, he fought off advances to join gangs. He worked for years in the sand mines. He was jailed in Spain after illegally entering Europe. He was homeless in Paris until life took an altogether different path once he began training.

MT: His circumstances, his beginning, we're never going to see anything of this magnitude again. He had a lot of different challenges just to get to this country.

SI: Did you feel a connection with him?

MT: I did. I still do. We have a very similar spirit. Determination, will-power and the desire to win, we share that.

SI: Ngannou took a bold step when he left the UFC last spring for a partnership with the Professional Fighters League, which afforded him the chance to box Fury. What would have happened had you switched from boxing to MMA?

MT: I love boxing; it changed my life—but I like MMA, too. I like what Francis is doing. I would have done both like he's doing. One day, the heavyweight champion in boxing will become the heavyweight champion in MMA. I would have gone for that. □

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

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SCORECARD: TALE OF THE TAPE

CURE ALL

JIMMY BUTLER'S MEDIA DAY
EMO LOOK BROUGHT TO MIND A
CERTAIN BRITISH SINGER

BY MARK BECHTEL



JIMMY BUTLER
Miami Heat

ROBERT SMITH
The Cure

Led Heat to two NBA Finals	THERMAL ACCOMPLISHMENT	Released 1988 classic single “Hot Hot Hot!!!”
Memorably wept on court after Miami’s loss to the Nuggets in the 2023 NBA Finals	TEARS	Released 1979 classic single “Boys Don’t Cry”
Inspired not to play guitar by meeting Garth Brooks (“[His] hands . . . were so calloused”)	SIX-STRING: YEA OR NAY?	Inspired to play guitar by seeing Jimi Hendrix (“[He] seemed completely free”)
In the three hours before retiring, drinks herbal tea, avoids screen time and employs a cold-air diffuser, then shoots for nine hours of shut-eye	BEDTIME PHILOSOPHY	“Let’s Go to Bed”
Always hammered the Hornets last year: scored at least 20 points and shot at least 57.9% in all four games	CHARLOTTE	Sometimes
Averaged 22.4 points per game on 55.1% shooting last year—but Heat went just 4–7 in his TGIF outings	FRIDAY	He’s in love



SI SPORTSBOOK

JOYLESS DIVISION

As if Emo Jimmy needed another reason to feel

bummed . . . earlier this summer, the Heat were listed at +800 to win the NBA title. Portland guard

Damian Lillard, who had long been linked in a trade to Miami, was instead shipped to Milwaukee in late September.

Since that move, the Bucks have seen their odds shorten from +550 to +350, making them the odds-on title

pick. The Heat, meanwhile, are now +2000, which puts them in a tie for third among Eastern Conference

teams (behind the Bucks and Celtics, and even with the 76ers). Still, Miami remains the overwhelming

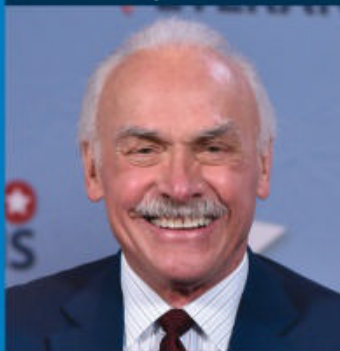
favorite in the Southeast, where the second-place Hawks are a sad +7000.

For more odds, visit [SISportsbook.com](https://www.sisportsbook.com)

WILFREDO LEE/AP (BUTLER); ROSS MARINO/GETTY IMAGES (SMITH); DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (HENDRIX)

SALUTE TO VETERANS

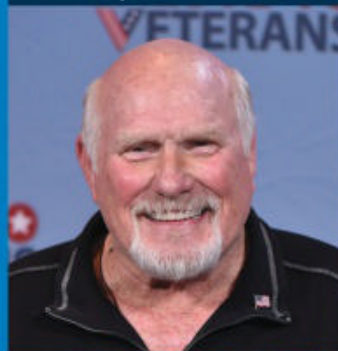
★ Rocky Bleier ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh



★ Terry Bradshaw ★



TV Host & Hall of Famer,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

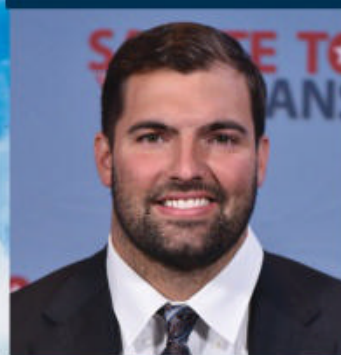
★ Greg Gadson ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
Honorary Captain,
2-time Champion with New York



★ Alejandro Villanueva ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
2-time Pro Bowler,
Baltimore



★ Joe Cardona ★



U.S. Navy Veteran,
2-time Champion,
New England



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SCORECARD: HISTORY

AFTERMATH PROBLEM

*THE NFL FACED A CONUNDRUM 60 YEARS AGO
IN THE WAKE OF JFK'S ASSASSINATION*

► BY MATT VERDERAME

ON FRIDAY, Nov. 22, 1963, at 12:30 p.m. CT, America changed forever. While waving to crowds from the back seat of his midnight-blue 1961 Lincoln Continental as his motorcade wove through Dallas's Dealey Plaza, John F. Kennedy

was shot. Within an hour, the country was processing the awful news: The 35th president of the United States was dead.

Like every other American, the NFL's 37-year-old commissioner was in shock. But Pete Rozelle, a former Rams GM who had been

on the job for nearly four years, also had a decision to make, and he knew what to do. He picked up a phone at NFL headquarters in New York City and called Pierre Salinger, a friend from their days as classmates at the University of San Francisco and Kennedy's press secretary.

Somehow, Rozelle reached Salinger at the Honolulu Airport. In less than 48 hours, the NFL was scheduled to play a full slate of seven games. What should the commissioner do?

Salinger told Rozelle that the president would have wanted the games to go on. So they did.

The backlash was swift. The media was outraged that the NFL would play on as the country mourned. (The rival AFL had canceled its slate for that weekend.

MISTAKE BY THE LAKE?

Rozelle (below) was criticized for going through with games, including in Cleveland, where the flag flew at half-staff.

Meanwhile, the NBA and NHL played that weekend, and many college football games went on as scheduled.) Even some NFL owners disagreed with Rozelle, including the Eagles' Frank McNamee, who didn't attend his team's home game against Washington. Cleveland's Art Modell was also against the decision, especially because the Cowboys—the nation turned against Dallas and its institutions in the aftermath of the assassination—were coming to his city.

Rozelle's decision stuck with him for decades. Publicly, he was contrite. (Thirty years later he called it the “worst decision I ever made.”) Privately, the commissioner felt differently. “He was embarrassed by the negative publicity and attention that the league got for playing the games,” says Joe Browne, an NFL executive who worked for the league in various capacities from 1965 to 2016 and was a longtime Rozelle confidant. “People forget that all kinds of sporting activities and entertainment continued that weekend. . . . He believed down deep that he did the right thing.”

Indeed, the decision to go on with the games hardly dampened the NFL's rapid 1960s evolution into a sports and cultural behemoth. But 38 years later, Rozelle's angst colored another dilemma faced by his successor, Paul Tagliabue, as he walked from his New York City apartment to the NFL offices on Park Avenue, looking skyward at the smoke emanating from the fallen World Trade Center.

ED O'BRADOVICH remembers the day of JFK's assassination well. He can't forget it.

That Friday was unseasonably warm, a 60° November afternoon in Chicago. The Bears were practicing at Wrigley Field in a drizzle. The ivy on the stadium's outfield walls was browned and shriveled, ready for a long winter's nap. The mood was good. Chicago was coming off a home victory over Vince Lombardi's Packers, putting the Bears a game ahead of their Western Conference rival with four games to play.

Then, shock. Word broke on the field that Kennedy had been assassinated. “Each guy kind of went his own way, but it was stunning,” says O'Bradovich, a defensive end for the Bears from 1962 to '71. “The president of the United States was shot and killed? Where? Dallas? How could this happen?”

After practicing once more on Saturday, the Bears drove to O'Hare and took a charter to Pittsburgh. Unlike most other flights, there was little chatter and no card games, only a feeling of numbness. “When the NFL announced we were going

to play, I can tell you this, our hearts weren't in the game,” says O'Bradovich, 83. “I can't speak for the Steelers, but I'd assume they felt the same way. What the hell are we doing, playing?”

In Green Bay, Lombardi was both somber and irritated. Kennedy was a personal friend. The two had shared the dais at a Wisconsin campaign stop in 1960 and hit it off. Kennedy gave Lombardi his personal phone number, which the coach used in '61 to ask for a favor: springing Hall of Fame halfback Paul Hornung—whose Army reserve unit had been called to active duty at Fort Riley, in Kansas—so he could play in the NFL championship game. (The Golden Boy scored 19 points in a 37–0 Packers win.)

Now Lombardi's sense of loyalty left him at odds with Rozelle. “Coach Lombardi advocated for canceling the game, and we all felt that was appropriate,” says Hall of Fame guard Jerry Kramer, who is now 87 and played with the Packers from 1958 to '68. “Coach had a relationship with JFK, and he was pretty upset. Of course we were upset, too. He didn't actually break down and cry or anything, but he was very terse and short in his announcements. ‘We're going to play. Commissioner said we're going to play.’ And that's it.”

And so, on Nov. 24, 1963, the NFL played. It was hardly a normal football Sunday. All three networks were devoted to wall-to-wall JFK coverage, so instead of seeing the Washington-Philadelphia game, fans tuning in to CBS that afternoon saw coverage of the death of accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, who was gunned down on live TV by nightclub owner Jack Ruby 39 minutes before the day's games kicked off.

Hundreds of thousands of

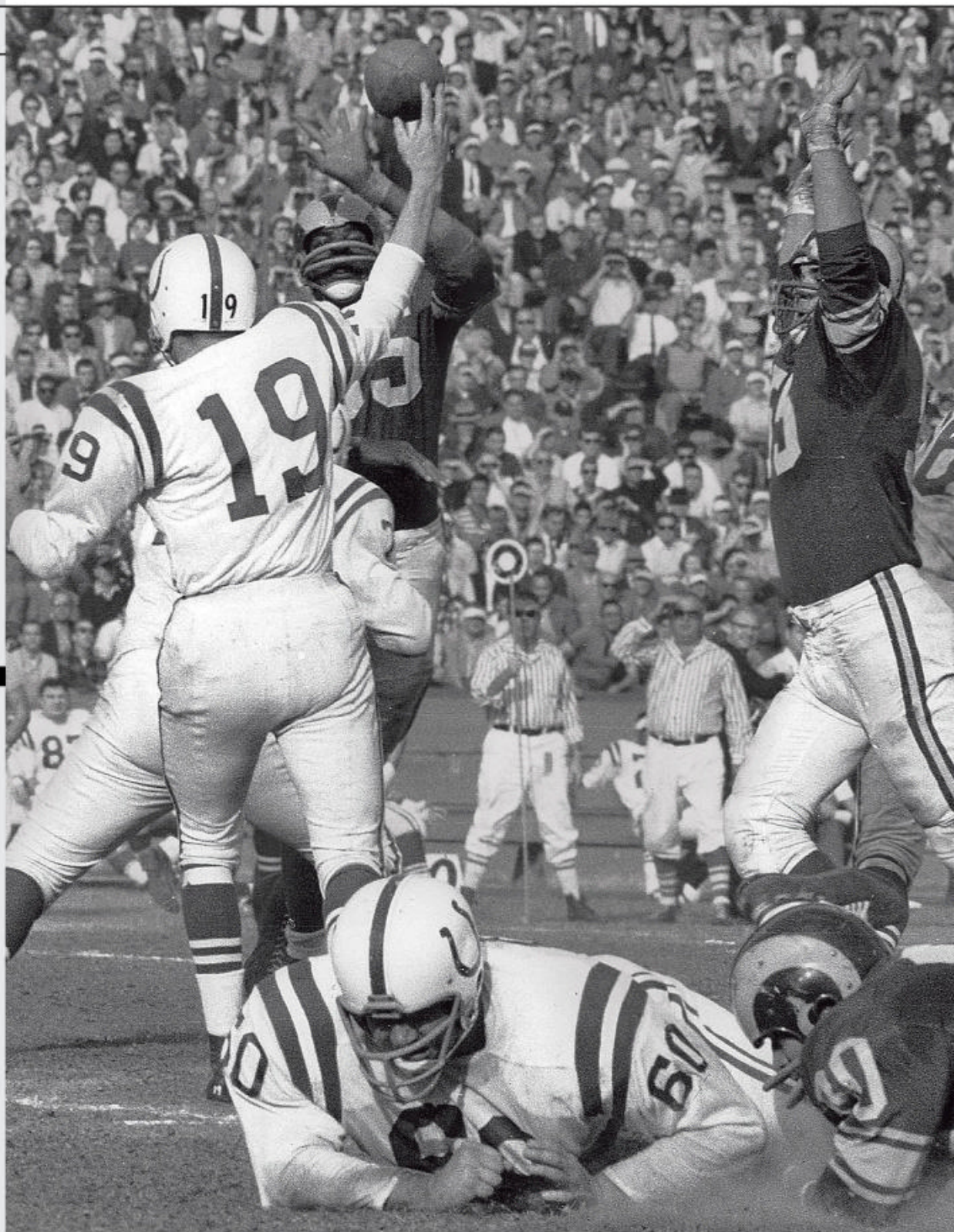


THE PACKERS' KRAMER RECALLS, "THE SADNESS HUNG OVER YOU FOR DAYS."

fans learned of Oswald's killing on transistor radios inside NFL venues. Despite the horror of the prior 48 hours and the outcry over football being played, the stadiums were packed. Cleveland Municipal Stadium, Franklin Field in Philadelphia, Forbes Field in Pittsburgh . . . all of them. Rozelle himself was at Yankee Stadium, taking in a key Eastern Conference contest between the Giants and the St. Louis Cardinals. At one point, New York quarterback Y.A. Tittle had to implore the crowd to quiet down while trying to bark out signals.

Both Green Bay (8-2) and Chicago (9-1) played meaningful games that day. The Packers easily handled the 49ers, 28-10, while the Bears, who would go on to win the NFL title a month later, had a much tougher time with the Steelers, playing to a 17-17 tie. "I remember the overwhelming sadness of the situation," says Kramer. "It wasn't a momentary-and-disappear kind of thing. It hung over you for days."

Still, a weekend that began with a perceived misstep by Rozelle ended up being a statement about the pro football's emerging place in the American psyche. After



decades of the NFL being a distant second to Major League Baseball among the men's big four leagues, the degree to which it drove conversations in the days after one of America's ugliest moments showed just how much the league mattered—not just as a diversion, but also as a cultural phenomenon.

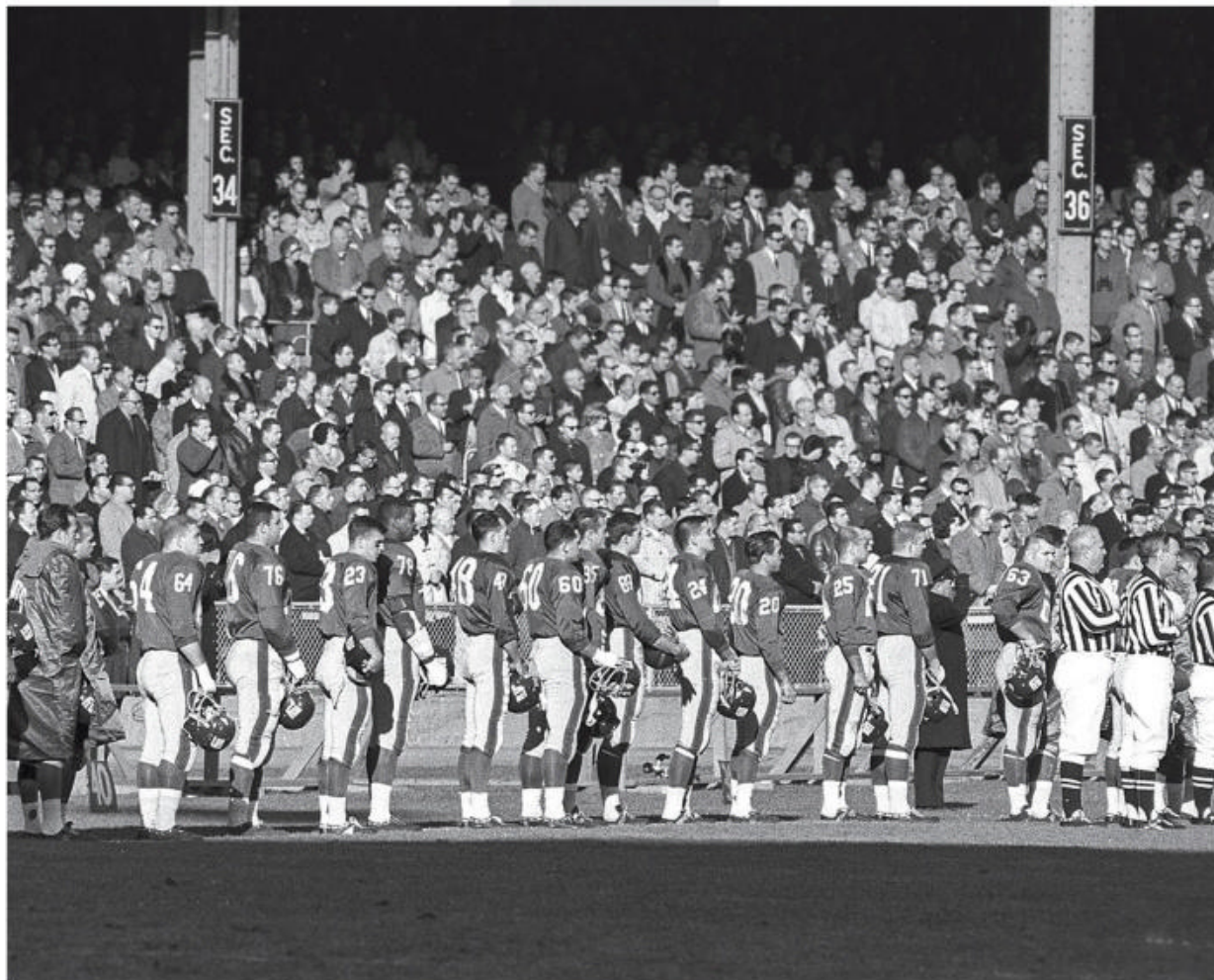
FOR MONTHS, all Budd Thalman and the Navy football team wanted to do was return to Dallas. Then, in an instant, it was the last place they wanted to be.

In 1963, the Midshipmen were a powerhouse. They entered the

annual Army-Navy game, scheduled for Nov. 30, with an 8-1 record. With a victory over Army, Navy would earn a berth in the Cotton Bowl and the chance to play Texas for the national title.

The season had largely been a dream. Junior quarterback Roger Staubach was about to win the Heisman Trophy and had spent part of the fall prepping for a cover story that would never run.

"The week before [Kennedy's assassination], a *Life* photographer was following Staubach around the campus," says Thalman, Navy's sports information director from

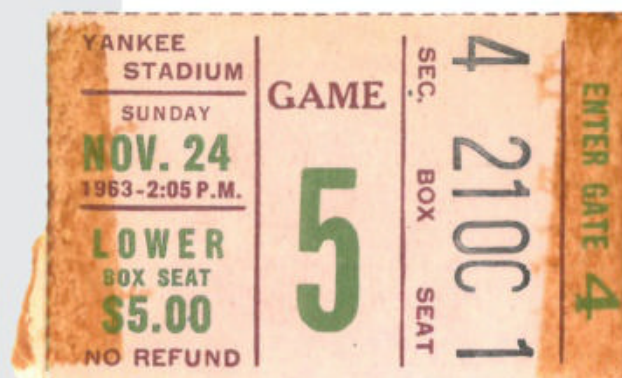


1962 to '73. "I said to him, 'Is there any way Staubach won't be on the cover?' He said, 'Only some sort of catastrophe.'"

Thalman still has the cover that never ran. *Life* printed 300,000 copies before pulling it. It hangs on the wall of his home. He got a copy for Staubach as well.

Kennedy had, of course, been a Navy man, earning a Purple Heart in World War II. The feeling in Annapolis was that the Army game wouldn't be played, but it was an event that meant a great deal to Kennedy, who attended in 1961 and '62 with plans to do so again in '63.

"What I heard in the office and talking to other people in the academy was that it would not be played," Thalman says. "My understanding these 60 years later is that it was played because Mrs. Kennedy said it should be. She said that's what the president would want."



COAST TO COAST

Few fans took up the Rams on their offer of refunds for their game against the Colts (left), while the Giants drew a sellout crowd.

Many of the Midshipmen had met the president at Quonset Point, R.I., in 1962 when Kennedy flew into the naval air base there on his way to Cape Cod. Upon his arrival, the team changed from practice

gear to dress whites and lined up to shake hands with their commander in chief.

Fifteen days after Kennedy's assassination, on the 22nd anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attacks, the Midshipmen stuffed Army near the goal line as time ticked away. Navy was going to the Cotton Bowl. Going to Dallas.

There was talk of skipping the trip, but eventually Navy decided to go. (The Middies would lose to Texas, 28-6.) So it was that on Christmas Day, Thalman found himself standing in front of the Texas School Book Depository, the building from which Oswald had fired his fateful shots. Thalman stared at the building, surrounded by other people doing the same thing for reasons nobody could explain. "I just thought I should be there," Thalman says. "It was just one of those things, you say to yourself. It was hallowed ground. I thought I should be there."

PAUL TAGLIABUE could do only what every other American was doing as the September 11 attacks unfolded: He watched in horror.

Tagliabue, an NFL lawyer under Rozelle before taking over as the league's seventh commissioner when Rozelle retired in 1989, now had to navigate his own national crisis. Unlike Rozelle, who had 48 hours until his games were scheduled to kick off, Tagliabue had five days. And although the Kennedy assassination had taken place almost four decades earlier, it was one of the key considerations in Tagliabue's planning.

The NFL had played the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. It had played two days after Kennedy was killed. Yet Tagliabue was charting a new course, believing the right move was to pause, not push on. "Fortunately, Paul

had enough time to think about what would be right for the league and country, and he did not play,” Browne says. “But there were owners both in ’63 and 2001 who thought we aren’t going to let terrorists ruin and upset our way of life. That we should continue with business as usual.”

Tagliabue wasn’t alone in his choice to stop. Major League Baseball halted its pennant races, postponing games for a week before resuming play. In the end, despite the one-week interruption, all 248 regular-season games were played that season. Tagliabue is roundly credited with making the right choice.

ON JAN. 6, 1964, 45 days after Kennedy was assassinated, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* released its Sportsperson of the Year issue. The cover was adorned with each of the 14 NFL helmets and a man in a black suit and red tie, the left side of his face covered by a shadow: Pete Rozelle.

The accompanying eight-page story did not mention the decision to play after Kennedy’s assassination until midway through. Instead, it largely focused on the deft handling of the NFL’s gambling crisis



LOYAL ACADEMY

Former Army coach and JFK friend Lombardi (left) was against playing, while the Cadets delayed their game with Staubach’s Navy.

from April 1963, when Hornung and another future Hall of Famer, Alex Karras, were suspended indefinitely (and reinstated for ’64) for wagering on sports, including NFL games. Said Cowboys general manager Tex Schramm in the piece, “Pete Rozelle’s handling of the investigations was the thing that made everybody accept him as commissioner and no longer a boy playing the part. He gained once and for all everybody’s complete respect.”

Historically, the decision to play two days after Kennedy was gunned down is more resonant. But at the time, Rozelle’s ability to mitigate what could have been an irreparable blight on the NFL’s on-field product was seen as being of paramount importance.

For Rozelle, it was the most challenging year in what became arguably the most esteemed career for a North American sports executive. Says Michael MacCambridge, NFL historian and author of *America’s Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation*, “After 29 years of leadership in which he is generally considered the greatest commissioner of all time, if his greatest mistake was that he played games the Sunday after JFK was shot, as great mistakes go, that was not a bad one.” □

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POP'S SHOT

PHOTOGRAPH BY
AL TIELEMANS

AFTER BRYCE JAMES visited Ohio State in October, the Buckeyes offered the 16-year-old shooting guard a scholarship. (His older brother, Bronny, is currently a freshman at USC.) While Bryce—who transferred for his junior season to Notre Dame High in Sherman Oaks, Calif.—is quite the prospect, he's still yet to turn in a prep performance

like his dad, LeBron, became known for. Twenty years ago, in February 2003, the soon-to-be King set the bar high for the James family, dropping 52 points for St. Vincent–St. Mary of Akron against Westchester High, an L.A. school led by Trevor Ariza—who, 18 years later, would join LeBron as a teammate on the Lakers.

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► BY DAN FALKENHEIM

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CLAY SHIVELY ► Sport: Cross-Country ► Hometown: Wichita, Kans.

Shively, a senior at Trinity Academy, ran a 14:42.60 5K at the Olathe Twilight Invitational in September, breaking the state record. Two weeks later, he broke the 5K course record (15:23.90) at the Roy Griak Invitational in Falcon Heights, Minn., becoming the first male runner from Kansas to win the event. A Northern Arizona commit, Shively also eclipsed the state's indoor one-mile mark (4:04.95) in January.



MALACHI NICHOLSON ► Sport: Football ► Hometown: El Reno, Okla.

Nicholson, a senior running back at El Reno High, rushed for 521 yards and eight touchdowns on 37 carries in a 68–67 defeat of Noble High, breaking Oklahoma's large-school single-game rushing record. Five of his eight touchdowns went for at least 50 yards, and the team captain's 56-yard run to the end zone gave El Reno the go-ahead score with 3:26 remaining in the fourth quarter.



YOUNES ADDAR KHANOUSSI ► Sport: Soccer ► Hometown: Castellón, Spain

Addar, a grad student and forward for Franklin Pierce, scored his third game-winning goal in four games, finding the net with 7:54 left to play in a 1–0 defeat of Southern Connecticut State. Through the first week of October, Addar led Division II with 14 goals in nine games. As a senior, Addar was selected to the NCAA All-Tournament Team and helped the Ravens to their second national title in program history.

SURFING

New Wave

► **CAITY SIMMERS** is trying to graduate from Coastal Academy High early, but in October she was already behind on her schoolwork. Give her a break; she's been busy. In March, Simmers, then 17, won the MED Rip Curl Pro Portugal event to become the youngest surfer to win a World Surf League championship tour stage in 13 years. During the season she also won the Vivo Rio Pro and then finished fourth at

the WSL Finals in September. Her results at the tour stop in Tahiti in August qualified her to represent the U.S. in the 2024 Paris Games.

"It was something that I never thought would even be possible," says Simmers. "It's pretty dang prestigious and cool that I get to go to the Olympics."

The Oceanside, Calif., native also directed, edited and released two surf films this year, *Toasted* and *Bell Jar*, set to the jams of women punk rockers.

"Surfing doesn't have as much style as snowboard and skateboard videos," she says. "I wanted to put that in surfing."

How did she find the time? □



COURTESY OF ERIC CARROLL (SHIVELY); COURTESY OF RUSSELL COOK (NICHOLSON); LUKE TRACY/FRANKLIN PIERCE ATHLETICS (ADDAR); PAT NOLAN/WORLD SURF LEAGUE/BETTY IMAGES (SIMMERS)

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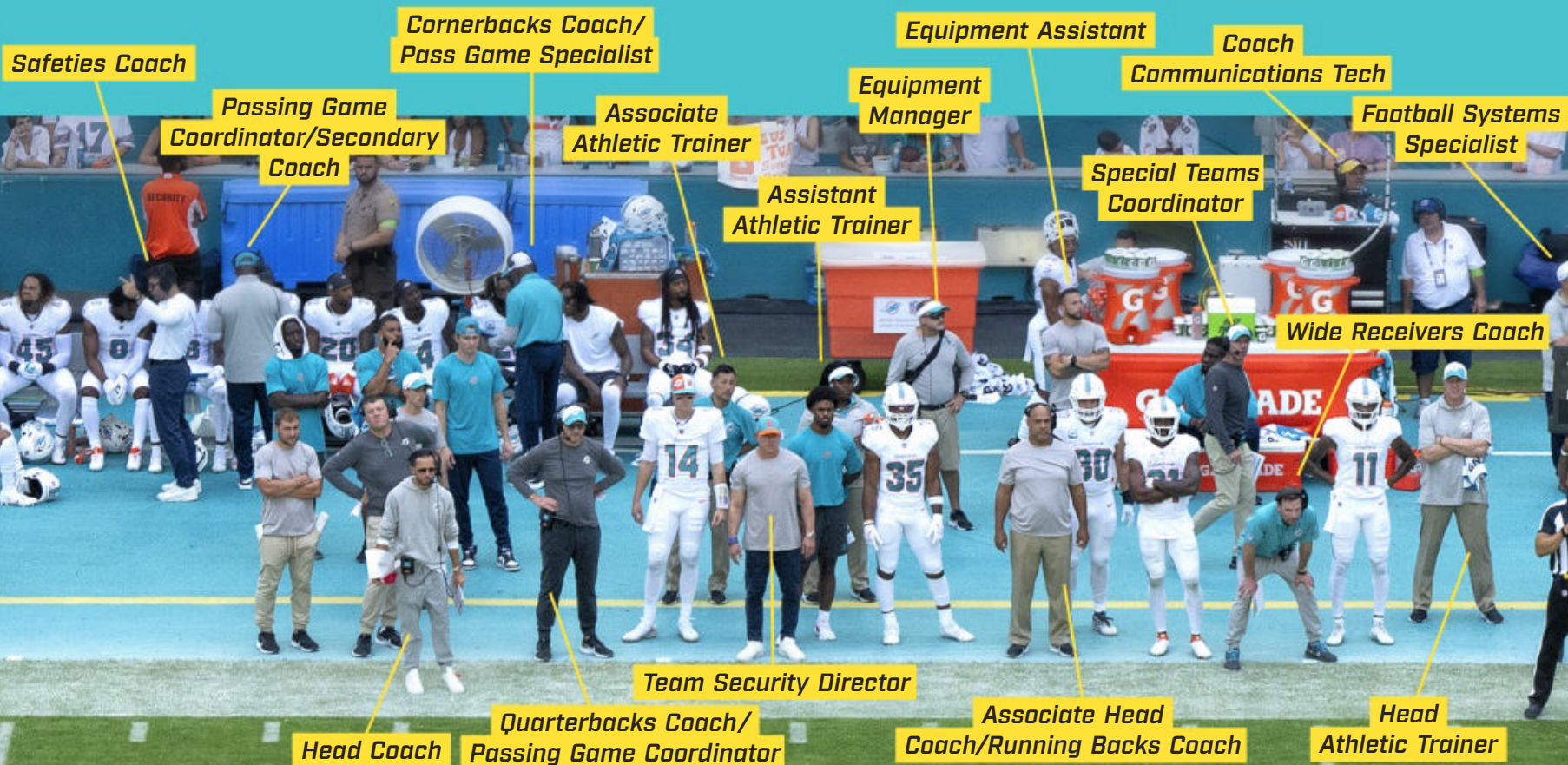


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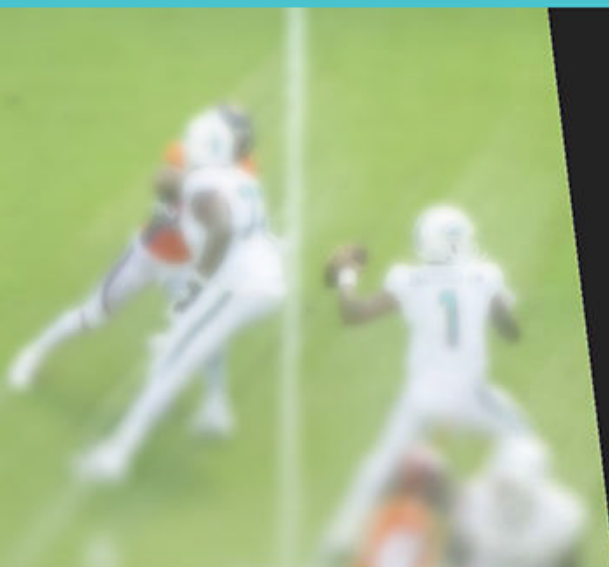




We take a lot in sports for granted: an F1 course on the Vegas Strip, say, or an Olympic sprint behind it all are fascinating. Let's start with the mysteries of an NFL sideline, where the

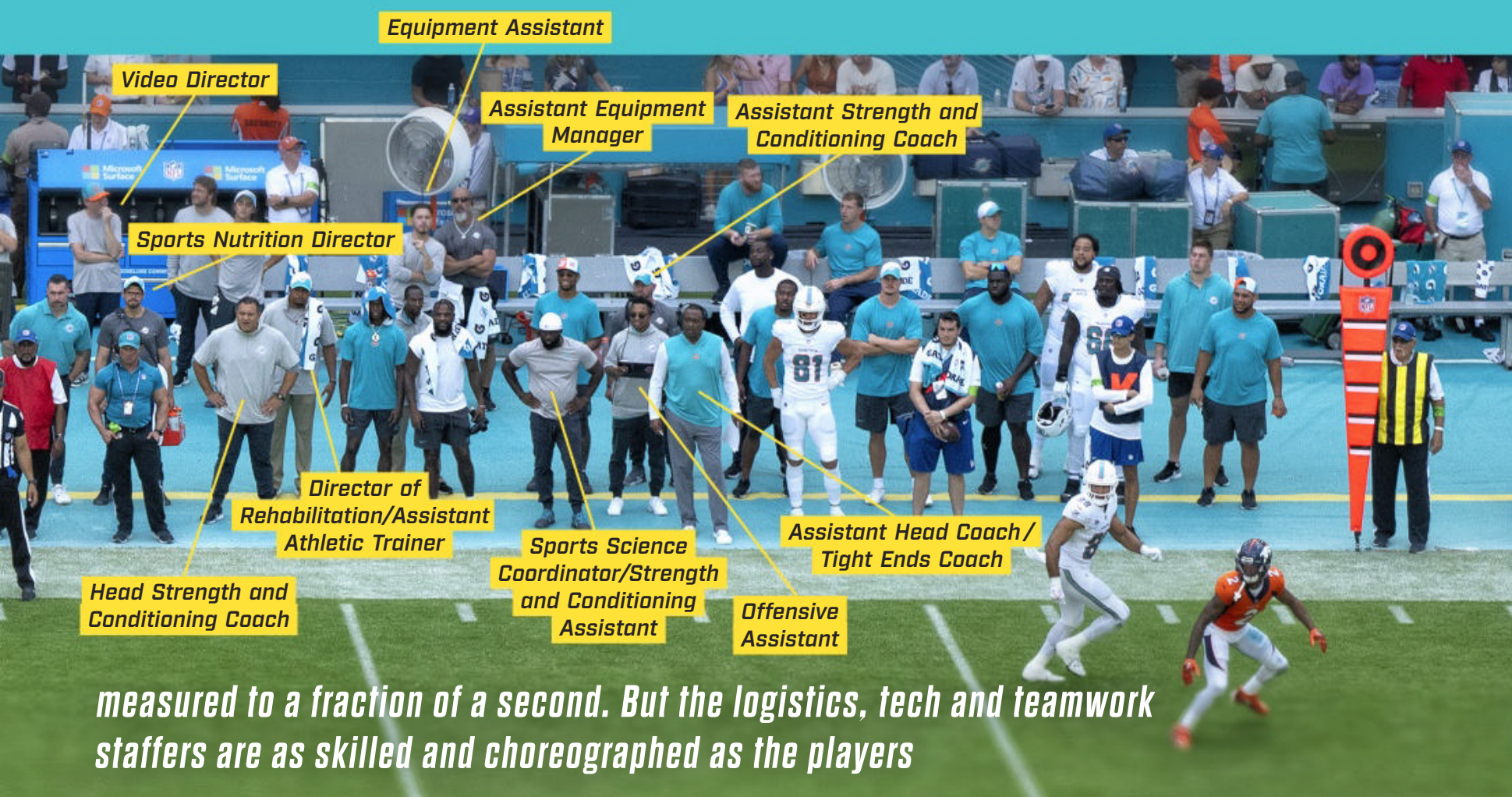
> CROWDED HOUSE

The players get the attention, but a typical NFL sideline—like the Dolphins' in Week 3—contains an entire galaxy of essential team and league staffers.



BY
**MITCH
GOLDICH
AND
CONOR
ORR**

PHOTOGRAPH
BY
**KOHJIRO
KINNO**





“What’s Metallica without a guitar?” MIKE MCDANIEL ASKS.

The Dolphins’ second-year coach is speaking hypothetically about the essence of what makes a band, but also more generally about the people and objects that make up any group defined by the way it performs. “Probably not selling albums,” he adds.

The head coach sets a football team’s culture. That’s true of McDaniel and the 31 others in his position across the NFL, each of whom are spokespeople, managers and decision-makers on issues large and small. They typically receive the credit when a team sees its fortunes turn around, and the blame when it doesn’t.

But the truth is McDaniel is reliant on an army of people surrounding him on the org chart, many of whom have been with the Dolphins significantly longer than he has. They are “head coaches of their own departments,” as he puts it. Some of them have been in place for decades. He can appreciate their behind-the-scenes dedication, having started his career in the equipment room as a Broncos ball boy.

“People don’t really understand what type of commitment that is to be on a seven-day-a-week program,” he told SI in September of his vast support staff. “So it’s awesome when the team finds success, because you find those people are doing it for the right reasons.”

Four days later, his Dolphins stomped the Broncos by 50 points in their home opener. They



CHAIN OF COMMAND

Tagovailoa (right) is backed up by a staff of what McDaniel (top) calls “head coaches” of their departments.

set an NFL record with 726 yards and became the first team to score 10 touchdowns in a game since 1966. They could have broken the all-time scoring record of 72, if not for a merciful kneel down from within field goal range on their final play.

When we started this project, we didn't know the Dolphins would be one of the most prolific offenses in NFL history. We chose them to offer a portrait of an ordinary NFL Sunday, then witnessed one that was anything but. The goal was to spotlight the support staff, the essential sideline personnel, the unsung heroes of not just game day but every day across the NFL.

Looking back on that day of glowing afternoon sunshine, in which Miami temperatures reached the high 80s and the Dolphins' point total nearly followed suit, the pummeling was less like a rock anthem and more like a sweeping orchestral performance. This is what it looks like when the tiny details fretted over and unseen grunt work at odd hours all pay off. When every member of an ensemble hits just the right notes. □



ERICK W. RASCO (MCDANIEL, TAGOVAILOA); KOHJIRO KINNO (OLIVER)

The Tech Guru

NAME: *PATRICK OLIVER*

WITH DOLPHINS SINCE: *2016*

➤ **FOUR HOURS** before kickoff, Patrick Oliver arrives at the stadium and finds the man in the purple hat.

On an NFL sideline, the “purple hat” is the league representative in charge of the Microsoft Surface Pro tablets that fans see coaches furiously jabbing and, sometimes, Tom Brady spiking into the bench. Oliver is there to make sure the tablets are operational and meet the requirements of the Miami coaching staff, which include one important note: The Dolphins do not like to have the stylus pens attached to their tablets. The strings are too likely to get caught on something, and in only very cold weather, when players' gloved hands will not activate the touchscreen, will they ask the purple hat to keep the pens attached.

Each team is allowed a maximum of 16 tablets per game, and Oliver lets the league know that Miami will take the full allotment. Two of their coaches still prefer to look at in-game all-22 photos

the old-fashioned way, so Oliver and his crew have a printer on the sideline. A runner staples photos together and sprints them to coaches who need them. [The team would not confirm which coaches still prefer printouts.]

Oliver and his team also confirm the reliability of data transfers from Mike Nobler and his



film crew [page 28]. What players and coaches see on tablets is, essentially, a series of still photos taken during the all-22 filming process. Additionally, this season players and coaches are able to see statistics on the Surface tablets for the first time. Oliver says it takes roughly 10 seconds from the

completion of a play until the moment the still photographs are ready.

As Miami's football systems specialist, Oliver's job is to always be on; he admits that "caffeine doesn't really work for me anymore." On any given day he might have to figure out why an office computer isn't functioning [paying special attention to Mike McDaniel's space-age 55-inch curved monitor desktop, which allows him the most possible screen space], or why the Wi-Fi has become spotty on sidelines since COVID-19 hit. The reason: The benches were spaced out a few additional yards to prevent close contact, but no one accounted for the reach of the Wi-Fi.

"Right at the 50-yard line there's two antennas," Oliver says. "They're both pointing out, so, right where they cross at the 50, your tablet jumps back and forth [between Wi-Fi feeds], and it feels like it's a dead zone."

Coaches in Miami exist in various inhuman sleeping cycles, with some staying in the office until 2 a.m. and others opting to arrive for work at 3 a.m.—which means someone from Oliver's staff always needs to be near

their phone. Asked whether he'll receive more than a dozen post-10 p.m. phone calls per season, he says, "Definitely." When Oliver was on a honeymoon cruise to Iceland and Ireland with a week in Switzerland added on, he says, "I was in the middle of the ocean getting phone calls. . . . It's just part of the business. My wife understands it."

He can sound as much like a linebacker as an IT specialist: "Every department in this building is grinding nonstop for one game a week, for as long as we can go. The playoffs last year definitely, I think, increased that hunger to go farther and do better. If it requires working more hours, we work more hours."

The hardest part is finding vendors that are not used to the rigors of professional football but are willing to keep up with an NFL schedule. "I was just talking with a vendor, and they were like, 'We're ready to do the install,' " Oliver says. "I was like, 'Well, your hours to do the install are between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m.' They were like, 'We're going to need to reschedule.'"

"I was like, 'You let me know when you're available during that time of day, and we'll make this work.' " □

The Healer

NAME: *JASMIN GRIMES*

WITH DOLPHINS SINCE: *2018*

THERE ARE at least 16 ways to tape an ankle, Jasmin Grimes says. It's her job as an assistant athletic trainer to know which way each Dolphins player prefers. Some want the tape a little higher, others a little lower, some a little looser or with a little extra tape here or there. And, to give away an industry secret, some players want certain body parts taped only because it looks cool. "If you look good, you feel good, you play good," Grimes says.

The secret to a good tape job, like most things in pro football, comes down to reps. Grimes has been with Miami for six seasons now. Most players have a go-to trainer, and she says building relationships with the ones she considers her guys has gone a long way toward understanding how best to get them ready to take the field. That includes everything from taping ankles and wrists to cutting T-shirts just the right way to fit under shoulder pads.

Pro Bowl linebacker Bradley Chubb says after he was traded to the Dolphins in the middle of the 2022 season, he tried out tape jobs from every trainer and quickly became one of Grimes's regulars. "She did it perfect the first time," he says, "and it's been like that ever since."

Grimes played basketball in high school and grew close to her athletic trainer as she dealt with a few injuries. When she arrived at the University of Maryland, she hoped to work with the women's basketball team, but those trainer jobs went to the most experienced students. She made the move to football instead, where the Terps' head coach, Randy Edsall, had been Grimes's father Roland's position coach when he played fullback at Syracuse in the '80s.

When Grimes was getting her master's in athletic training at FIU in Miami, the Owls' head trainer, who had worked for the Dolphins, placed a call on her behalf. She started as a summer intern in 2018 and worked her way up from there. Her final year as an intern was the '20 season, when the pandemic wreaked havoc on everything. The team gave Grimes COVID-19 liaison duties, putting her in charge of all sorts of protocols, from keeping track of testing results to notifying players of contact-tracing concerns.

Her list of responsibilities has only grown, now including everything from working out rehabilitating players to driving the injury cart. Yes, when a player needs to be taken to the locker room for X-rays during a game, it's Grimes behind the wheel. Forget about a road test; she didn't even get a test drive. Her first time driving the cart came in a full stadium, where any mishap would surely find its way to social media. So far there has been only one minor incident, a video of her that circulated online after she had to yell at people to move out of the cart's way.

As the first woman to become a full-time athletic trainer on the Dolphins' staff, Grimes is cognizant of how her role matters. "Sometimes it only takes one, and I think it opens doors for a lot of women behind me," she says. It's something

THE HAT SYSTEM

In addition to team staff, an NFL sideline has many league reps whose functions are marked by the color of their hats



ORANGE (2-3)
Event Frequency Coordinator



ORANGE WITH NFL SHIELD (2)
Coach-to-Player Communication Tech

she talks to her boss about as they try to include women among their interns every summer.

When Grimes started out, she used to keep a list of every female athletic trainer in the NFL, saying it was important for her to make that list someday. She guesses there were around six in 2019, with the number of Black women like her even smaller. Numbers have grown in both regards across the league in recent years.

When she's not driving the injury cart, taping body parts or dressing wounds, Grimes can often be found worrying about players' hydration levels, a vital task in Miami's heat. One crucial element of her job: when players start cramping, knowing who will want Pedialyte and who will want pickle juice, both of which are kept in small coolers in front of the Gatorade. Fortunately, players don't seem to care much about which color the Gatorade is, though the team avoids red for two critical reasons. One, some players are allergic to the dye. Two, a red stain on a white jersey could be confused for blood.

"Sometimes you have to force them [to drink]," she says. "But a lot of times if a player comes off the field, we just kind of put it in their face a little bit. It's almost like thinking for them and knowing what they need before they realize they need it. I'm thinking two steps ahead." □



The Producer

NAME: *MIKE NOBLER*

WITH DOLPHINS SINCE: *2015*

LAST SEASON, in the Week 18 game against the Jets that would seal the Dolphins' playoff berth, the coach-to-quarterback headset went out.

The NFL has standardized frequencies in each stadium to ensure that radio communication does not go haywire and a frequency coordinator to oversee the system (known as an EFC, identifiable on the sidelines by an orange hat). But on that day, somehow the frequency the Dolphins were using for coach to player got jammed up. It wasn't unheard of. Once before, a nearby Sunday school turned on a device that bled into the stadium's network.

Enter Mike Nobler, the Dolphins' video director. "In that moment Coach McDaniel isn't like, 'Mike, take the time you need. We're going to just call a 15-minute timeout and we're going to figure this out,' " he says.



GRAY (1)

Football Technology
Rep



BLUE (4)

Injury Video Review
Operator



TEAL (1)

Instant Replay Field
Communicator

Nobler got on the phone with NFL HQ while running through a troubleshooting checklist. Did the other team also lose headset access? Is it just the quarterback's helmet, or is it the defensive player wearing the green dot, too?

Then he had to enact the team's backup plan, a handheld walkie-talkie that neither McDaniel nor his defensive coordinator was familiar with. But first he had to check in with the EFC to confirm that the walkie-talkie would cut off coach-to-QB communication with 15 seconds remaining on the play clock, just as the helmets are required to. "At that moment it's like, oh my God, this is a win-and-you're-in game. And right now a coach can't communicate with the quarterback on the field. That's a pretty big deal," Nobler says.

Headset troubleshooting isn't even Nobler's main job, but as video director he's intimately connected to the lifeblood of any team: the offensive and defensive play-calling system. Nobler, who has been in his role for the past nine years, often gets mistaken for the person who makes video elements for the scoreboard. In reality, he and his staff record every game and practice, and marry that footage with data (down, distance, time, players involved, opponents faced, situation on the field, etc.) so that time-crunched coaches can pull up any clip they need at a moment's notice. He has a film library with almost every conceivable moment of Dolphins football since 2008 on a server somewhere. There is additional footage on there going back to 1984.

Coaches will ask Nobler and his staff for individual projects. Since the video of each game that all 32 teams shoot and upload to a central database comes with only a few generic

COURTESY OF PETER MCMAHON/MIAMI DOLPHINS

The Enforcer

NAME:
ADAM LACHANCE

WITH DOLPHINS SINCE:
2015



> ON GAME-DAY morning, Adam Lachance wakes up at 5:30 a.m. and makes a critical stop before arriving at Hard Rock Stadium to begin his duties as assistant strength and conditioning coach: McDonald's.

Breakfast burritos have been part of his game-day routine for most of the nine years Lachance has worked with the Dolphins. Before that he was a proud Army man for nearly seven years, serving out of Fort Bragg

in the parachute infantry regiment. He did three tours in Afghanistan and one in Oman. His job was to attach with a sniper or special operations unit and call in aircraft support if his team was in a firefight.



▲ HE'S GOT YOU

He doesn't build the game plan, but Nobler (left) makes strategy conversations possible by making sure Dolphins coaches have every conceivable video clip of the action on the field—in practice and during games.

filters (down, distance, etc.), his staff works with numerous third-party vendors and its own in-house data hub to apply more sortable variables.

"If we walk in Monday at 6 a.m. and you say, let me see all two-point conversions from the weekend, done," he says. "Let me see all fumbles; let me see all forced fumbles; let me see all interceptions; let me see all touchdown runs when teams were in 22-personnel. We can do all that."

When Nobler isn't trying to solve some frequency outage in the cosmos on game day, his staff of three films every play from three different angles: the all-22 angle, which is a wide shot taken from high above the 50-yard line so every player is in every shot, and then two end-zone

angles, taken between the goalposts, directly in the middle of the hashes. This season is the first year that the Dolphins are shooting both end zone angles. Nobler is the kind of person who gets excited about discussing the ethics of whether plays that aren't run (a QB calling timeout at the line, for example) should be included in the standardized video log.

"There's a whole rule book on how many cameras we can have, what type of camera we're shooting, when we start and stop a play," Nobler says. "So you're not excluding certain things. You can't exclude motions and shifts. You can't manipulate the video into a way to make it seem like we didn't do something like, 'Oh, we ran this great fake punt. Oops, we didn't include that for Denver to see.' You can't do that at all."

One member of Nobler's staff will edit the video live as it comes in, play by play. Another will edit and manage still shots of the video, which make up the bulk of the content contained on the blue Surface Pro tablets players and coaches look at on the sideline. After the game the footage will be immediately uploaded to the NFL's centralized Club Game Exchange.

If all goes according to plan, by the time McDaniel reaches his car or bus seat after a game, he can watch what just occurred in almost any way possible, sorted through any of the 350 data filters Nobler and his team have facilitated. If there is something McDaniel wants that is not yet available, such as every play where his upcoming opponent's star defensive tackle is lined up just a shade to the left of the center?

"It's like, O.K., give me a minute to think about how we're going to do that," Nobler says. "And then we do it." □

ERICK W. RASCO

So football responsibilities aren't all that daunting. "I couldn't see myself in a field where there's a lot of *I can't*," Lachance says. "If you can help someone reach their goals, you get a lot of fulfillment from that."

Before kickoff, Lachance is in the building working out the practice squad. Then he'll assist players with stretching or the active release technique, which helps with soft tissue manipulation. On the

field, he is monitoring the landscape. Some players have strict warmup routines that he doesn't want to interfere with. Others could use assistance.

His size—in high school he dabbled in bodybuilding and he still looks as if he

could stack boulders one-handed—and personal touch make him an ideal "get back" coach: He's responsible for keeping players from surging onto the field and incurring penalties. Lachance has learned which

players and coaches respond best to shoves and taps, though sometimes he has no choice but to body-wrap someone like a pro wrestler.

"They're usually O.K. with it," he says. "No one wants a 15-yard penalty." □



➤ **IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

The Miami support system helped the Dolphins win five of their first six games, the franchise's best start in 21 years.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO



The Protector

NAME: *LARRY JURIGA JR.*

WITH DOLPHINS SINCE: *2000*

THE FIRST thing you learn about subduing a fan who's run onto the field: Don't chase them. So says Larry Juriga Jr., a 6' 4", 300-pound, second-generation Dolphins security guard. Unless they're running directly at a player, of course. But if not, "You let them get tired and then go grab them," he says.

Juriga is authorized to use necessary force, he says, but it happens less than you might expect. It's more common that he has to protect the sideline from projectiles. When the Dolphins traveled to Buffalo for a prime-time game last December, he found himself batting snowballs like a rim-protecting center swatting away finger rolls.

"Sometimes fans get silly," he says. "They're not looking to hurt anybody, I wouldn't think. They're just looking to be a bother." Juriga says his concern is not just the obvious—player safety—but the scoreboard as well. "The players are trying to focus on the game and focus on what the coaches are telling them," he says.

Juriga was born and raised in Miami. His father, Larry Sr., worked for Hard Rock Stadium (then known as Joe Robbie Stadium) when it opened in 1987, then later worked directly for the team. Larry Jr. got a job as a 16-year-old high school student, working field security for the company contracted by the stadium. Now 52, he says his father "was and is still my best friend," including best man at his wedding. He followed in his dad's footsteps in more ways than one, first becoming a policeman at the North Miami Police Department, then officially working for the Dolphins starting in 2000. He rose to chief of police, but is now full time with the team after retiring from the force in March.

Juriga stands guard on the sideline only during away games. For home games he has another



THE HAT SYSTEM



MAROON (3)

Instant Replay
Field Operator



GREEN (1)

Sideline Television
Coordinator

vital task. After Mike McDaniel has arrived at the stadium on game day, Juriga will drive to the coach's house to take McDaniel's wife, Katie, and family to the stadium. He then stays in their box during the game. It may sound menial to some, but there is an earnestness in the way Juriga describes the importance of this job. "If Coach McDaniel doesn't have to worry about his wife getting to the game, if he doesn't have to worry about where they're at, he can focus on taking care of the team and what he needs to on the field." This is what it looks like when everyone in an organization feels invested in winning.

Juriga's deep knowledge of the stadium and surrounding complex has led to other interesting assignments. On the night of Super Bowl XLI, when the Colts beat the Bears in 2007, Juriga was attached to a VIP: Roger Goodell. As the first-year commissioner glad-handed at various appearances in the parking lot pregame and then traveled up and down from his suite, it was helpful to have someone who knew his way around.

For road games Juriga is part of the crew that screens luggage before the team boards its bus, essentially serving as TSA to hasten the process of flying home. This has been a particularly busy season thanks to the team's Nov. 5 game against the Chiefs in Frankfurt, Germany. Planning meetings started months in advance, including an offseason trip for many staffers to get the lay of the land. "Step on the bus, step on the plane in one country, step off the plane in another country, get on the bus and go directly there," Juriga says. "That doesn't just happen by chance." □

➤ AT HALFTIME of the Dolphins' Week 2 win over the Patriots, a smirking Mike McDaniel finished his interview with NBC sideline reporter Melissa Stark and started jogging toward the tunnel in stride with a muscular member of the team's support staff.

After a few moments, McDaniel said something to the staffer and worked himself into a full sprint. The coach, a former wide receiver at Yale, kept looking backward as he left his coworker behind.

That staffer was Drew Brooks, director of team security. "Mike was a lot faster than I was expecting, to be honest with you,"

he says of the moment that went viral. "I'm not as young as my mind says I am."

Brooks is 52 but looks like he could enroll at the University of Miami tomorrow and convince someone he has eligibility as a linebacker. For two decades he was a police officer in Pembroke Pines, Fla. He spent time on the SWAT team, investigated auto thefts and murders, and served as the department's union leader. On game day, McDaniel is his primary responsibility. Brooks is the coach's body man and personal "get back" coordinator. It can be a unique experience. At one stressful point

in the Patriots game, McDaniel looked at him and said, "Nice sneakers, dude."

"Then he walked away," Brooks says. "That's just how he is. You don't know what's going to happen next, so I love it."

The night before games, Brooks is responsible for doing the team's curfew check. [Miami's curfew varies by situation; it's not a set time every week.] The morning of a game, following his 6 a.m. workout, he gets to the stadium to check off that every member of the team has arrived. Tardiness is a fineable offense.

From there, Brooks attends the NFL's 100-minute meeting, which, for a 1 p.m. game, usually lasts from 11:20 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. There, team security officials and referees go over the protocol for any interruption, such as an intruder on the field or, more recent, the presence of a drone in nearby airspace.

There is always something for Brooks to keep tabs on. Thanks to the contacts he has through his police work, Brooks will be called on to expedite the acquisition of passports or take care of other

delicate details. A security director takes the kind of calls no one else in the organization can. One recent example: a threat levied against a player on social media. "We don't take anything lightly and [we] look into it," Brooks says.

Being part of the organization is a dream come true for a lifelong Dolphins fan. "When I was 14 years old, I stood in line two hours to get Dan Marino's autograph," Brooks says. Now the Hall of Fame quarterback (and special adviser to team owner Stephen Ross) will call him up, and they'll go to dinner. "Never in a million years did I think that would ever happen," Brooks says.

Game day can be chaotic—with so many people around and the possibility for so many unexpected things to happen—but that's when Brooks lets out a sigh of relief. Throughout the week, he must be everywhere and nowhere, hidden and available. "Getting to the game itself, it's like the job's done for the week," he says. "We have everybody there and accounted for on the field. The game is my kind of peace." □

The Problem Solver

NAME: *DREW BROOKS*

WITH DOLPHINS SINCE: *2016*



◀ SECURITY BLANKET

On game day Brooks (left) keeps the coach close; during the week he's there for the entire organization.

The Gear Head

NAME: CHARLIE THIELE

WITH DOLPHINS SINCE: 1994

IF EVERYTHING goes according to plan, game day is Charlie Thiele's quietest time of the week. And if that's the case, it's a testament to how much prep work has been done in the days leading up to kickoff.

The life of an assistant equipment manager is one of endless checklists and contingency plans, knowing which player likes which type of helmet, cleats and other accessories.

When something happens in the heat of the game—such as a player coming to him and saying, *I'm slipping, what do I do?*—Thiele knows, *Hey, we already spoke about this.* He is ready with different types of cleats for different surfaces or weather and backup plans for everything.

For helmets, Thiele's team takes 3-D scans of new players' heads to customize the insides—always a busy day at rookie minicamp. He then works on those helmets every Tuesday, sanitizing them in an ozone machine and checking all the face masks, which need to be in place to withstand hits in practice. Then he changes them all out on Fridays so every player has a brand-new face mask on game day.

Thiele studies pieces of equipment many take for granted. “You don't know if a chin strap's about to break,” he says. “We try to stay ahead of it. If you do see something break, I like to think it was new to start on game day and whatever happened out there was pretty bad for that to happen.”

The packing list for road games is huge. The gear needed for the Week 1 game in Los Angeles was dwarfed by an August trip to Houston that featured days of joint practices leading up to a preseason game. It was Thiele's job to know which items could go in the multiple trucks the team sent ahead and which items needed to fly in. Thiele has to remember to ask other teams whether they have an extra blocking sled.

If not, the Dolphins might bring their own.

Packing up a team and moving all of its belongings is a massive undertaking. “We have up to 40 trunks,” Thiele says. “And then the trainers might have 15, 20 trunks. Video might have 15, 20 trunks.”

And packing them is only half the battle.

“Each trunk has X, Y, Z in it, one, two, three, in the same order,” he continues. “So when a guy asks for something, I could say, ‘It's that trunk over there, number 34, third drawer down.’ On game day, it's five seconds. ‘Here it is.’ ”

A 1 p.m. home Sunday game, like Week 3 against the Broncos, is a relative piece of cake—though it still starts with Thiele's customary 4:45 a.m. wake-up time so he can meet the trucks by 6 at the team facility to move things next door to the stadium.

Home or away, he spends game day scanning the bench and watching players come off the field. “If I see a guy come off and he's fiddling with his chin strap, I'll go over to him. ‘Do you have an issue, or are your gloves getting caught and you can't do it?’ ” he says. “Or he's looking at his shoes, or his shoes are untied. I've done that multiple times, tied a shoe. People think, Why? He can't tie his own shoe? No. He's got gloves on. He's thinking about the next play.

THE HAT SYSTEM



PURPLE (4)

Still Photo Tech



RED (3)

Unaffiliated
Neurotrauma
Consultant



I just get it done, and he's able to go back in."

Sometimes a player might decide he wants his helmet visor removed midgame due to the heat in Miami—and then a dozen other players decide the same. Thiele stays calm as his massive hands undo tiny buckles or screws for players who want to hurry up to get back into a game. "Most guys wear visors," he says. "Our guys will get used to [the heat] over time, but sometimes they go out there and say, 'Hey, I want my visor off.'"

Not all equipment asks are game-related—players know they can come to Thiele for extra socks, sweats or popular team-issued items. *Hey, that hoodie was great. Can I get another?*

Thiele's contributions to the team are not limited to the gear his players wear. He has one other crucial job that's a bit of a claim to fame: He is the stand-in center who snaps the ball to quarterbacks during certain drills.

Thiele joined the team as an intern shortly after graduating in 1994, meaning the first quarterback to put a hand under his butt during an offseason practice session was none other than Dan Marino. There was just one problem: Thiele, a natural lefty, snapped it with the wrong hand.

"All I hear is, 'What the . . .'" as Thiele retells the story of his very first snap. He was worried Marino had broken a finger or something. Thiele says legendary special teams coach Mike Westhoff showed him how to snap it right-handed, a move he's deployed for every Dolphins quarterback since.

His talents are put into play for seven-on-seven drills or when offensive linemen are otherwise occupied. This includes on the field during pregame warmups as receivers run through their routes. "And I know it's very important," Thiele says. "Listening to their cadence, because it means something. Because that's where the play starts." Though he is thankful he won't be called upon in an actual game. "I don't have to block a 350-pounder in front of me," he says. "So that's the good part."

Thiele explains that almost every quarterback is different in the way he likes to receive the ball, including how hard and at which angle. He can trace a lineage of Miami QBs from Marino to Tua Tagovailoa, and current backups Mike White and Skylar Thompson. As Thiele describes getting accustomed to what makes each QB most comfortable, he repeats a maxim so many of his game-day coworkers across the Dolphins' organization live by: "You just figure it out." □

The Messenger

NAME:

RENZO SHEPPARD

WITH DOLPHINS SINCE:

2016



➤ WHEN AN injured Dolphin is announced as questionable to return, you're probably getting the news through Renzo Sheppard. As football communications manager, Sheppard, who goes by Zo, is tasked with getting information from field level up to the press box.

Cellphones are prohibited on NFL sidelines, so Zo uses the big blue phone bank at the 50-yard line. Each handset can call only one destination—like, say, the press box—so you don't have to dial. When someone upstairs needs to reach the field, the bank lets out a hideously annoying ringtone.

After an injury, teams are required by the league to share the player's name, body part and designation (questionable, doubtful or out). So when a player is getting looked at, Sheppard, a Jacksonville native

who got his start with the Jaguars before joining the Dolphins in 2016, stays close to the athletic training staff for an update he can phone up to the PR director. During his first game in Jacksonville, he was the victim of a prank when someone on the team staff told him a player had a bruised Fallopian tube, just to see whether Sheppard would relay the message. He did.

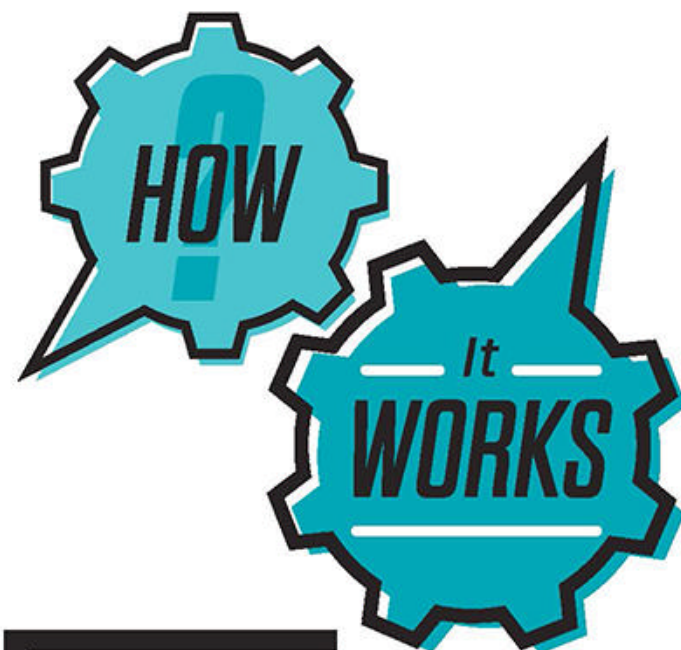
Another of his jobs is tracking down milestone footballs that might be of interest either to players or the Hall of Fame. Postgame, he helps wrangle players for interviews. Fans are familiar with the prime-time crews setting up desks on the field and getting stars to sit down after a big night. You can add in interview requests from local radio, Telemundo and more. Sheppard helps direct who needs to go where. □

➤ TOWER TRIP

Last fall Sergio Pérez gave observers a taste of what's to come when he took his Red Bull car for a quick spin on Las Vegas Boulevard.



DAN ISTITUTE/FORMULA 1/GETTY IMAGES



LAS VEGAS

FORMULA FOR SPEED

*Not all of what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, as the construction of the course for F1's maiden visit to the **GLITZIEST CITY** in the world has entailed a combination of temporary and permanent structures*

BY **MICHAEL ROSENBERG**

LAS VEGAS is built on fast living, and so it is a logical stop for the world's fastest sport. But when Formula One makes its Vegas debut on the night of Nov. 18, the most astounding speed story might be about the venue itself.

In less than two years, organizers built a track and infrastructure—much of it permanent, some of it temporary. Terry Miller, the project manager for the Las Vegas Grand Prix, has worked on professional sports stadiums, and he says, “The order of magnitude of this project is significantly beyond what NFL stadiums or MLB stadiums are,” Miller says.

The reasoning is simple. Imagine building a house on a lot. Now imagine building a house on that house. Stadium projects are challenging but self-contained: Architects have a clearly defined parcel of land to themselves. An F1 street track is part of a city—and, in this case, a vibrant city center that literally cannot afford to close down for a few days as other F1 hosts can. The southern Nevada tourism industry employs almost 15% of the labor force for the whole state. Miller says, “Singapore pretty much shuts down [the area around the track] for a month while they prepare

everything.” That was not an option in Las Vegas. So they decided to do all the paving in the morning, when Sin City is quietest—and even then, they had to make sure customers and employees had a way to enter and exit each property.

Vegas casinos have no clocks or windows, so gamblers have no concept of time. But Miller and his crew were perpetually conscious of the minutes ticking away. Miller says building an NFL stadium typically takes “48 months—maybe 36 months if we’re really pushing it. This, we did in a year. In May of 2022, we didn’t have a site, we didn’t have the property, we didn’t have a design, we didn’t have a contractor.”

Then there was the matter of the track itself. As Miller says: “It sounds pretty easy: ‘Well, you just drive on the existing streets.’ That’s not the way F1 works.” Tracks must be between 3.5 kilometers and seven kilometers long. They include tight turns to test a car’s handling and straights that need to be long enough for drivers to accelerate to eye-popping speed—but are safe enough to protect spectators and drivers if there is a crash.

F1 tracks are not made out of the same kind of asphalt you would find in front of your local elementary school. It is much denser and significantly smoother. So none of the existing roads were suitable for the race—and, in fact, having extant roads there only made the job harder. “We actually had to go in and take away anywhere from four to 10 inches of existing county roadways and then repave those 10 inches,” Miller says.

Of course, F1 cars do not simply drop out of the sky, land gently on a track and accelerate. Liberty Media, which owns Formula One, commissioned a 300,000-square-foot pit building on a 37-acre parcel on the corner of Harmon Avenue and Koval Lane, near the MGM Grand. The price tag: around half a billion dollars. “It was a perfect location,” Miller says. “But the site happened to lean—it was about a 25-foot drop from one corner to the other corner. So we had to come in and fill about 18 feet worth of earth on those 37 acres.”

Vegas organizers also faced a conundrum born of their own ambition. What makes the race unique is that it takes place along the Las Vegas Strip, one of the great urban spectacles in the world. But the more they incorporated the Strip, the harder the project became. This was especially true because of the timing: As F1 started its work, construction on the ambitious new Sphere arena—located just inside the loop near Turns 7, 8 and 9—was well underway. “While they were busy finishing their build, we were busy trying to figure out how to move through

STRIP STAKES

Construction of the 300,000-square-foot pit building (right) and the repaving of large portions of road have raised the ire of some locals.



that property without obstructing their ability to finish,” Miller says.

The Sphere opened this fall, with a U2 residency. Vegas’s F1 track is next up. So in one sense, the work is almost done. But really, it never is. “Once we create the circuit and we close it for the race, we’re encapsulating about 23,000 rooms [in] resorts,” Miller says. “We have to be able to get in and out—not only for emergency services, but



*While Miller says building an NFL stadium takes around four years, “In May of 2022, we **DIDN’T HAVE A SITE**, we didn’t have the property, we didn’t have a design, we didn’t have a contractor.”*

the guests of those hotels need to get in and out.”

The solution: four 760-foot-long two-lane bridges. They are supposed to be as sturdy as those you might drive on over on a highway, but they are temporary. This created another challenge: The bridge footings had to be specially constructed, because as Miller says, “We can’t leave dimples in the roads when we pick up these bridges.” The contractor that built the bridges is scheduled to install them, then dismantle and store them until next year’s race.

Was this all worth it? That depends on one’s point of view. Even with all of the logistical strategizing, residents have grumbled about traffic snarls, and an attempt to placate Nevadans by offering them resident-only tickets backfired when potential buyers noted that the tickets were good for only practice and still started at \$200. But anticipation for the race is extraordinary.

Daily attendance along the 3.8-mile track is

expected to exceed six figures. Standing-room tickets for three days (a practice day, qualifying and the race) were priced at \$500—and quickly sold out. Three-day tickets for seats range from \$2,000 to \$5,000.

The hype won’t be as great for next year’s race—but neither will the disruptions. Much of what happens in Vegas will stay in Vegas. That 300,000-square-foot structure is, of course, permanent. The asphalt should last several years—because it is so dense, it should endure longer than a typical road.

“But we are still going to have to build all the temporary grandstands, all the temporary hospitality,” Miller says. “We are still going to have to go in and put our barriers around the resort corridor, which changes all the traffic flow in and out of the resorts. So it’s still a significant effort in the following years.”

The roads will have to be repainted for normal traffic patterns. Temporary lights will come down. A three-story grandstand across from the Bellagio fountain will be dismantled as well.

But then, the ethos of Vegas is not about what you do before you arrive or after you leave. It is about the experience when you’re there.

The Vegas track has 17 corners, is one of the three longest in F1 and has one of the lengthiest straights: nearly 1.2 miles along Las Vegas Boulevard, aka the Strip. Drivers are expected to reach a top speed of 212 mph. But those are just specs. What makes it special is the location.

There is nothing quite like Las Vegas at night. Drivers will maneuver around the glowing orb that is the Sphere. They will speed past some of the world’s most famous casinos. This might raise another question for the casual F1 fan: Will the sensory overload of the Vegas Strip at night distract the drivers?

“We want Vegas popping,” Miller says. “The drivers are going to be focused on the road in front of them. We’ve had discussions with the properties about, you know, not having flashing images and things like that. And they’re all very cooperative. But the last thing we want to see is a dark Las Vegas. It’s going to be brilliant.” □



Like Clockwork

OMEGA HAS BEEN TIMING OLYMPIANS FOR 90 YEARS, BUT THE FUTURE HOLDS MORE THAN MERE MINUTES AND SECONDS

➤ **FOR THE 1932** Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, Omega sent one watchmaker from Switzerland with a suitcase filled with 30 chronographs—handheld stopwatches that were accurate to one-tenth of a second—to handle

every event that required timing. In the more than 90 years since [Omega is still the official timekeeper of the Games] the undertaking has become something that requires hundreds of tons of technology, not to mention around

550 timekeepers, to measure results to the millionth of a second (with a deviation of 23 nanoseconds per 24 hours).

The first big innovation in automatic timing systems came ahead of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, with the advent of technology that was relatively simple in retrospect: touchpads, which stop the clock when tapped by each competitor, giving

them a precise finishing time rather than relying on humans armed with stopwatches. [Touchpads obviously aren't an option in track. Competitors' times in those events are determined by high-speed photos taken at the finish line.]

"It took about two decades for federations to accept that electronic timekeeping was more accurate than humans pushing on stopwatches,"

says Alain Zobrist, the CEO of Swiss Timing who is in charge of Omega's Olympic efforts.

The swimming touchpad quickly opened the floodgates for advancements in other sports. False-start detection systems built into the starting blocks for track events were a big step forward, starting in 1984. Then came seemingly minor changes, but ones with the potential

to swing medal results. For instance, Omega developed an electronic starting pistol that flashes a light and connects to a speaker behind each racer, so as to eliminate the minuscule edge that racers with starting positions closer to the inside had due to their proximity to the gun.

Timeliness in producing results is also paramount. Zobrist says his goal is to be able to generate a time, produce a graphic

between the image you see and the data that should match the system.”

Ensuring all systems operate flawlessly during a race brings about all sorts of safeguards fans might not consider. For instance, Omega runs all the power

own power source fails, and, according to Zobrist, in some sports, hand-timing is still done as a fourth or fifth backup option. Devices are tested at extreme temperatures—they function perfectly from -76° to 176°—and have to be able to maintain accuracy

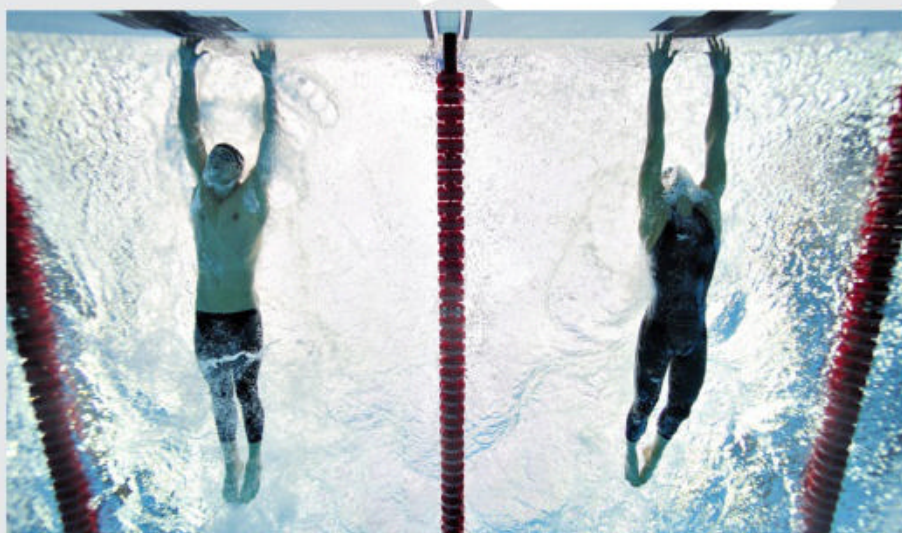
to perfection. Its debut is often in a nontelevised local event, and, if all goes well, it progresses slowly up to national championships, continental events and World Cups. The process can take months or years.

But what’s next in electronic

like gymnastics, where it can assist judges in things like determining the synchronicity of competitors in pairs trampolining.

And Omega is only scratching the surface of what it can do with all the data it collects, especially with the

“It took about two decades for federations to accept that electronic timekeeping was **MORE ACCURATE** than humans pushing on stopwatches,” says Zobrist.



> FINISHING TOUCHES

Cameras caught the 2021 time of Lamont Marcell Jacobs, while Michael Phelps (above, left) memorably tapped out in '08.

and have it on screens within a tenth of a second. “It is extremely important to maintain the live aspect of an athlete’s performance,” he says. “If the delay is longer [than a tenth of a second], we will have a discrepancy

for its technology on sources separate from the rest of the power a venue uses, which is done to make sure the timing system still works even in the event of a blackout mid-race. Systems also have battery backups in case their

despite exposure to electromagnetic fields and electrostatics.

Plus, a piece of equipment isn’t used at the Olympics until it has been tried out in several other lower-stakes competitions to ensure it works

timekeeping could change how we consume events like the Olympics. Over the past 10 years, motion and positioning sensors have been a focus. Omega started by attaching the sensors to bobsleds and has been able to shrink the sensors down to the point that they can be attached to athletes in some sports. At the Tokyo Games, the company deployed them in ways that could show an athlete’s real-time speed in track and swimming, acceleration rates and even minutia like the number of strokes by each swimmer. The pose detection technology is also being used in other sports,

ability to harness artificial intelligence to generate real-time insights. [Though the data isn’t necessarily used for judging purposes.] “We’re having artificial intelligence also [help] us understand the performance of athletes and eventually gained or lost time that was decisive for them winning or losing their race,” Zobrist says. “This is certainly the evolution we’re going to see now in the next couple of years, being able to compare performances through time a lot better in the future in order to be able to explain to audiences and fans how great these performances and athletes actually are.” —Kevin Sweeney

DOME SWEET DOME >

After 25 years of playing second fiddle to the Lakers in their own building, the Clippers are moving to Inglewood.

STEVE BALLMER SAYS: GET OFF YOUR PHONE

*How do you get people to pay attention as well as admission? The Clippers' owner is designing a **NEW ARENA** in Inglewood that will help fans stay in the moment*

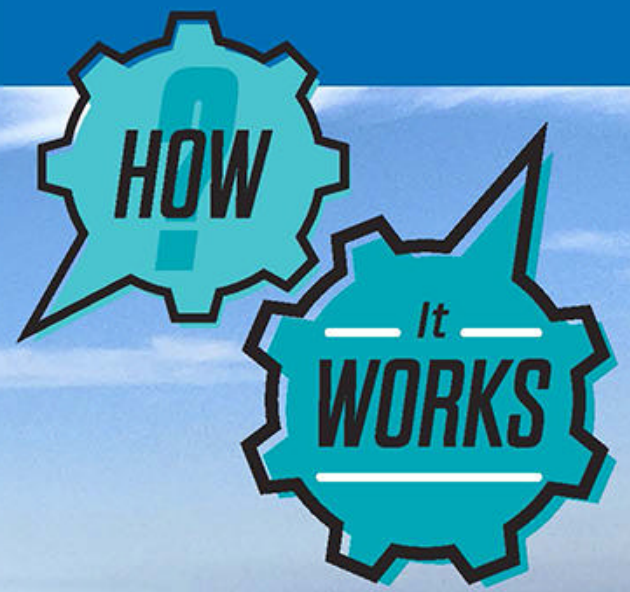
IN 1988, Paul Allen, who founded Microsoft alongside Bill Gates, bought the Trail Blazers for \$70 million. Seated behind the baseline during games and wearing a boyish grin verging on rapturous, he took great joy in the franchise. So much so that he evangelized sports ownership to his friend and coworker. Steve Ballmer recalls that, again and again, Allen gushed to him, *Steve, you gotta buy a team! Steve, you gotta buy a team!* Says Ballmer: "I saw what that meant to him."

Ballmer was too busy to heed Allen's suggestion, serving, as he was, as CEO of Microsoft. But in 2014, Ballmer retired. Just a few months later, the Clippers came on the block when the franchise's noxious owner, Donald Sterling, was essentially forced to part with the team.

This was no fire sale. Ballmer paid \$2 billion. For the perennially cursed Clippers. Three years after the 76ers had sold for \$280 million. And

BY **L. JON WERTHEIM**







the same year the Bucks sold for \$550 million. If this purchase reset the market for NBA teams, so be it. Ballmer had his team.

Over the past decade, odds are good you have seen Ballmer during a game. From his perch—not courtside nor cocooned in a suite but behind the basket, à la Allen, who died in 2018—Ballmer fixes his eyes on the court, overtaxes his larynx and takes it all in . . . as his phone rests in his pocket. “I try,” Ballmer says, “to be *present*.”

For those few hours from tip-off to the final buzzer, nothing else much matters. Ballmer, 67, can catch up on texts and emails on the post-game flight back to his home near Seattle. The next morning, he can make his calls and have his meetings and go down internet rabbit holes. But during the game, the former tech executive is transfixed. He didn’t buy the team to see and be seen. The return on investment is nice, but when you’re worth in excess of \$100 billion, more

HOW SUITE IT ISN'T

Ballmer's vision (rendering, near right) includes a steeply inclined superfan section designed to make people feel like they're hovering over the action.

than any other NBA owner, you’re not in it for the money. Ballmer loves basketball. He loves trying to see his team win. It’s hard for him to imagine going to a game for any other reason.

So it is that when the Clippers, for the first time in franchise history, cease being tenants and play in their *own* arena, the venue will be built in the owner’s image. Starting next season, the team will end its residency of Crypto.com Arena (né Staples Center) and venture 14 miles south to a new home—just for them—in Inglewood. It doesn’t look like much now—a dusty, bustling construction site SPORTS ILLUSTRATED recently toured, a few blocks from SoFi Stadium and down the street from the Forum, which Ballmer had to acquire from Knicks owner Jim Dolan’s Madison Square Garden Company before he could break ground (long story). Set to open in the fall of 2024, the Intuit Dome will be predicated on presence, the quaint idea that

COURTESY OF THE LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS (2);
ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/BETTY IMAGES (BALMER)



“This [building] is about being in your seat, being in the bowl, WATCHING THE TEAM,” Ballmer says.

fans should, literally, keep their eyes on the ball.

“There are casual fans, people who are happy to spend time in the bar and occasionally look out at the game. Love them. Great,” says Ballmer. “But we want to put our emphasis elsewhere. This [building] is about being in your seat, being in the bowl, watching the team.”

Let other teams stage their events in entertainment Xanadus, where the games become something akin to background noise, drowned out by on-site sportsbooks, wine-cellared bunker suites, food courts and nonstop diversion. The Clippers’ new joint—a “basketball palazzo,” the owner calls it—will zig where the others zag and emphasize the core product.

To that end, about 5,100 of the Intuit Dome’s 17,500 seats will be a court-level, steeply terraced section known as The Wall, inspired, Ballmer says, by when he visited Kawhi Leonard’s old gym at San Diego State and noted the energy of the student section. The hope is those fans—all but stacked on top of the court—stand throughout the game like Duke’s Cameron Crazies.

The arena will be arrayed with 199 “count-down clocks” throughout the building, nudging fans to find their sets before tip-off and the end of halftime. The building will feature more than 1,000 toilets (twice the NBA per-fan average, according to the Clippers)—yes, to expedite lavatorial needs, but more important, to minimize time spent waiting in line and thus not cheering on the home team. (“The thing I hate most in life



is arenas where you have to wait in line for the bathroom,” Ballmer once said. “I’ve become a real obsessive about toilets.”)

But the joint will also be remarkable for what it lacks. Most notably, there will be a paucity of suites, which Ballmer believes drain a building of atmosphere. The 48 traditional suites (compared to Crypto’s 172) that do exist will be consigned to one level, far from courtside. And the Clippers’ president of business operations, Gillian Zucker, had to prevail on the owner to put one video monitor in each suite. If Ballmer had it his way, even the fans in the fancy boxes would have no choice but to watch the damn game.

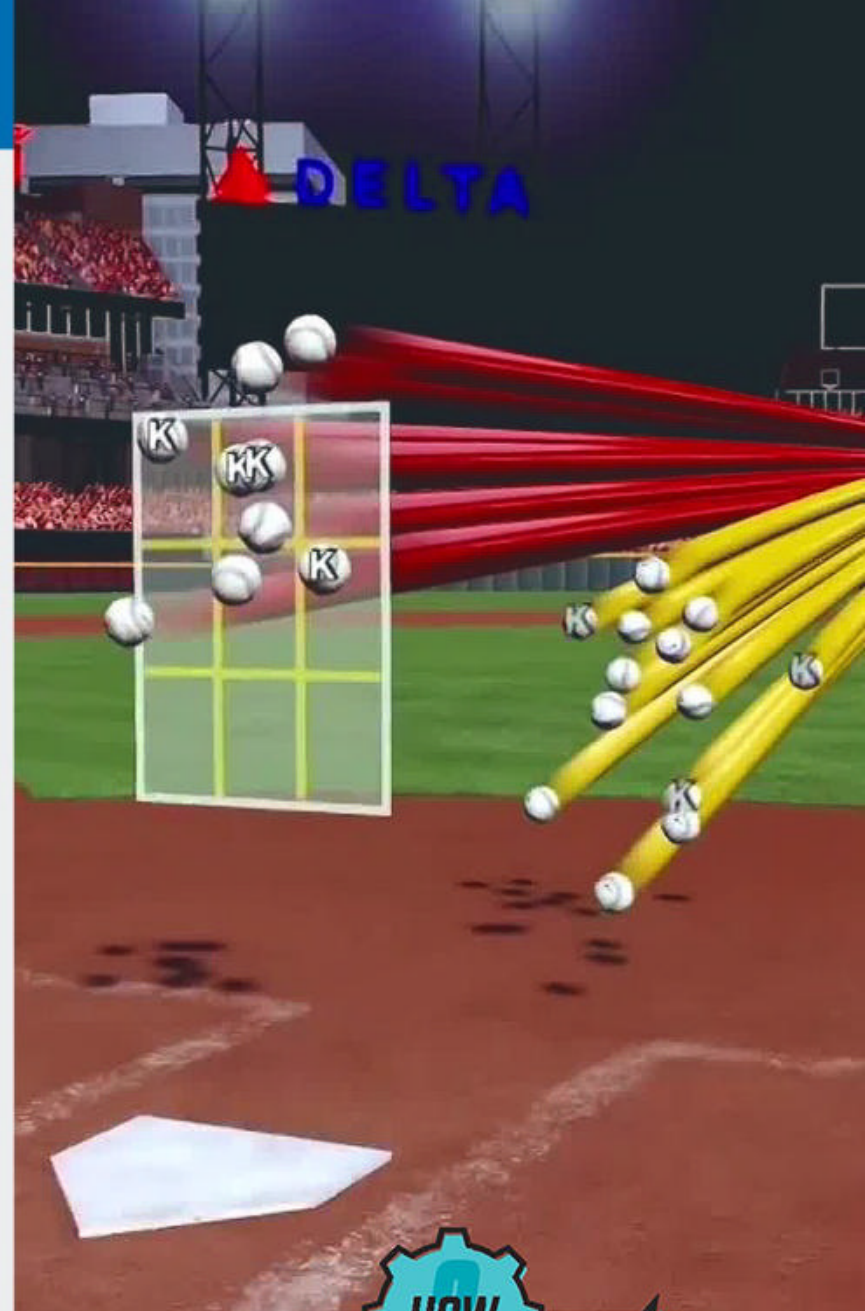
Likewise, there will be no restaurants at bowl level. Even if California legalizes sports gambling—it’s one of the 12 states that still bars it—there will be no gaming consoles on the seat-backs or in the concourses. Short of demanding fans check in their phones, every design touch is meant to direct focus onto the court.

On the surface, there is a certain irony to all this: *The titan of tech is overseeing a building that minimizes distraction and returns to the analog days when fans devote their attention to, you know, the actual games.* Ballmer contends it’s more nuanced than that. “I’m not [tech] skeptical,” he says. “But because I come from tech I am probably more sensitive to techifying without a good reason.”

So there *will* be a 360-degree, 38,375-square-foot scoreboard, The Halo, which wraps around the perimeter and might be the signature feature of the arena. But it’s designed to engage fans in the game. There will be cashierless concession stands that automatically charge fans who can just grab what they want (like Amazon Go stores). The baskets on both ends of the court will rest on elongated backboard arms, to push back the stanchion base and improve sight lines.

Apart from the throwback principles, Ballmer has empirical support for his contention that all these touches are in service of winning. A growing body of social science suggests that fans can impact results. The closer fans are to the playing surface, the greater the effects of the home court advantage. The louder fans are, the more they can influence officials’ calls. This engagement, this presence, matters. Per the man who is spending in excess of \$2 billion, privately funded, to build this basketball temple: “At the Intuit Dome, you’re not going to be a spectator; you’re going to be a participant. Your job is to help our guys.”

And besides, Ballmer says, “We need to differentiate ourselves from the Lakers.” □



Fast Track

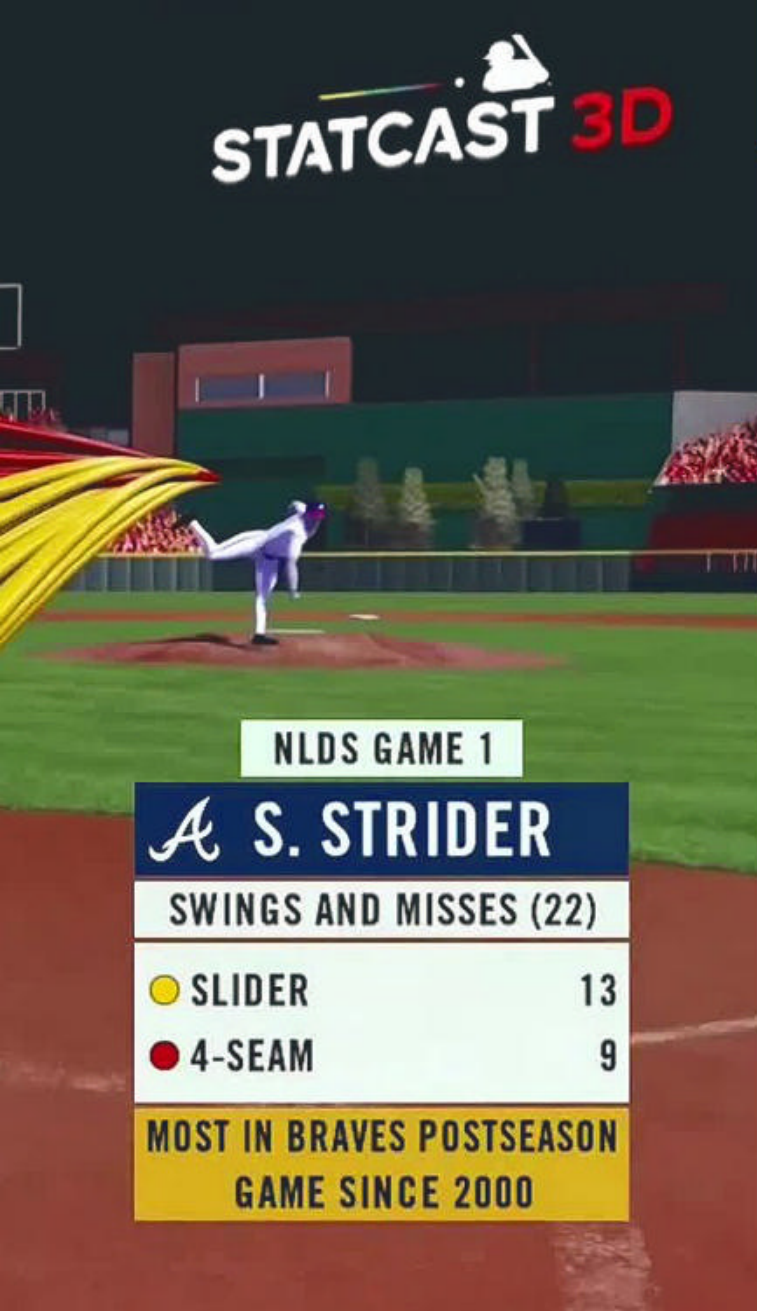
THANKS TO A NETWORK OF A DOZEN HIGH-SPEED CAMERAS, PITCHES ARE IDENTIFIED AND CATALOGED IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

➤ **THE LIFESPAN** of a major league pitch is less than half a second. If that’s difficult to conceptualize, think of the most basic, reductive metaphor for something that happens fast. Then go check the Harvard Database of Useful Biological Numbers and see that, yes, a major league fastball really does go from hand to home plate in the blink of an eye.

How does one accurately

capture that?

MLB’s answer is a system of 12 cameras positioned around each ballpark, the source of the data that makes up Statcast. [The optical tracking system is the product of sports tech company Hawk-Eye, best known for making line calls in tennis.] For the last few years, there were five cameras responsible for tracking pitches at 100 frames per second and seven



responsible for tracking players and batted balls at a comparatively languid 50 frames per second. But this season brought an upgrade.

It turned out that 100 frames a second wasn't quite enough for gathering all the information that MLB desired for Statcast. It wanted more data, faster.

So this season introduced new pitch-tracking cameras that instead capture 300 frames per second. (There are two cameras behind home plate, one by first base, one by third base and one in center field.) These create a veritable

biography for each individual pitch, capturing its velocity, spin rate, seam orientation, horizontal and vertical break and more, all in that half second of life.

The results can be easy to take for granted. They're ingrained in the game at this point: A pitch is thrown, and seemingly immediately "92-mph curveball" or "101-mph fastball" will flash on the scoreboard and TV broadcast. But the process of gathering that information is remarkably complex—and getting more so each year.

Take the camera upgrade this season.

The old hardware offered plenty of detail. But there was one area where MLB felt the results were lacking. *What about the exact moment the pitch crossed the plate and connected [or didn't] with the bat?* To capture 100 frames a second means losing just milliseconds between snapshots. Yet those milliseconds can be the difference between a whiff and a hit, between making good, hard contact and rolling over on a pitch. Hence the need to up the speed.

"At 100 frames a second, even, the bat moves so much between frames that you can't get a good read on how fast the bat has moved and exactly where it is," says Ben Jedlovec, senior director of baseball data platform product for MLB. "You have to go to that extra level of granularity, with three times the frame rate, to be able to see where the bat is and to be able to measure how fast it's moving, when and where, and really understand that bat-and-ball collision—or lack of collision."

This level of detail is astounding compared to what Statcast provided even just a few years ago. When the first version of the system was rolled out in 2015,

it could not provide the specific release point of a pitch; it simply assumed it based on the change in velocity. (Statcast originally used a combination of radar and cameras, none of which operated at the current speed.) But the current system takes out the need for that kind of guesswork. It provides the exact release point. It gives the spin rate and the spin axis. It even captures the orientation of the seams.

Of the hundreds of thousands of pitches thrown each season, Statcast now misses "only a handful," Jedlovec says. The errors have gotten smaller over the past few years—mistakes of an inch or two at the plate are now less than a quarter of an inch. (It bears noting that if MLB opts to go to robo umps, it will use Hawk-Eye to make calls.) The league works with the Sports Science Lab at Washington State to conduct ground-truth testing at every ballpark to ensure the system is as accurate as possible.

The resulting data has changed the game in the most literal sense. In some cases, it's provided a new language for age-old ideas. (Think of how any discussion of lifting the ball now involves

the term "launch angle.") In others, it's birthed entirely new concepts, with the data responsible for advancements in pitch design and defensive alignment.

"We thought about data as a way to evaluate players," Jedlovec says of the early days of Statcast. "We didn't necessarily anticipate—or at least I didn't anticipate—the way that it would ultimately shift the game."

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of how Statcast tracks a pitch is that the data is transmitted even faster than the pitch itself. The bulk of the information is communicated and stored as the three-dimensional coordinates of the ball in every frame from every camera. ("We run a pretty high Google Cloud bill every year," says Jedlovec.) But MLB requests a few specific pieces of data instantaneously. One of those is the speed of the ball as it leaves the pitcher's hand. "It's automated to the degree that in 250 milliseconds after that pitch is released, when it's on its way to the plate, we know how fast that was and we can send it to the scoreboard," he says.

Or put more simply? "It's like magic."

—Emma Baccellieri

A photograph of a baseball catcher in a blue and red uniform crouching on the field, with an umpire in a black uniform and mask to his left. A batter's leg and glove are visible on the right. The background is a blurred crowd of spectators. Large white letters 'r' and 'u' are overlaid on the right side of the image.

FANTASTIC



**THE RACE
FOR THE 2024
WORLD SERIES IS
ON—AND IT WILL
BE SHAPED BY
WHAT HAPPENS ON
THE FREE-AGENT
MARKET THIS
WINTER. HERE'S
YOUR GUIDE
TO THE MOST
IMPACTFUL (AND
MOST EXPENSIVE)
PLAYERS ON
THE MARKET**

**BY
WILL LAWS AND
NICK SELBE**

**PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO**

CODY BELLINGER Cubs OF/1B*

Our No. 2 free agent hit a career-best .307 with 26 homers this season; as the most sought-after pure position player on the market, he's due for a big raise over his \$12 million salary in 2023.

T

THE 2024 free-agent class is full of intriguing and impactful players. But make no mistake, this offseason will revolve around one name: Shohei Ohtani.

Before signing with the Angels upon his arrival from Japan ahead of the 2018 season, the two-way star made recruiting visits to several teams. He will undoubtedly take his time this time around as well. After undergoing elbow surgery in September that will make him only a DH next season, Ohtani may not command the \$500 million deal the baseball world once anticipated—but his price will be steep. Tracking the movement of other stars will also provide plenty of intrigue. We've taken into account age, health, performance and other factors in making the list of the top 50 free agents. There were also some judgment calls on those with team or player options for '24 (they're marked with an asterisk) and on who will actually be available. Check out the updated the list all winter on SI.com.



THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES (OHTANI); ERICK W. RASCO (SNELL)



1

SHOHEI OHTANI Angels SP/DH

Elbow surgery will keep him off the mound in 2024, but that won't dissuade teams from being interested in the game's preeminent star. Ohtani should be in line for a record-shattering contract. After six losing seasons with the Angels, it's presumed that he wants to join a contender.

2. **CODY BELLINGER** Cubs OF/1B*

3. **BLAKE SNELL** Padres SP

Snell ended the season as the overwhelming favorite to win his second Cy Young Award after leading the majors in ERA (2.25) and hits allowed per nine IP (5.8), but he's not without his warts. The southpaw also led the majors with 99 walks, likely making him the first Cy Young winner to do that since Early Wynn in 1959. Still, he's an ace and will be paid like one ahead of his age-31 season.

4. **AARON NOLA** Phillies SP

5. **YOSHINOBU YAMAMOTO** Orix Buffaloes SP

6. **JOSH HADER** Padres RP

7. **MATT CHAPMAN** Blue Jays 3B

8. **SONNY GRAY** Twins SP

9. **JORDAN MONTGOMERY** Rangers SP

10. **EDUARDO RODRIGUEZ** Tigers SP*

11. **RHYS HOSKINS** Phillies 1B

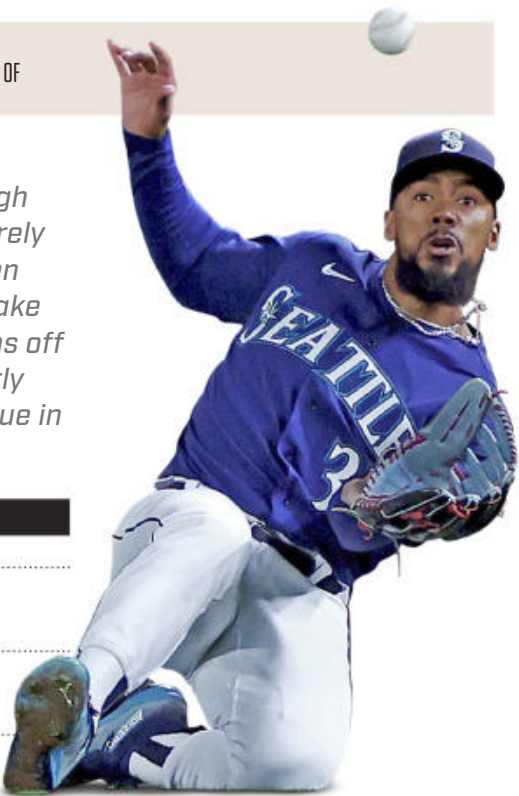
12. **LOURDES GURRIEL JR.** Diamondbacks OF

13. **MARCUS STROMAN** Cubs SP*



14. **TEOSCAR HERNÁNDEZ** Mariners OF

His plate discipline is a concern, as he posts high strikeout rates while rarely drawing walks. But when the 31-year-old does make contact the ball screams off his bat—he’s consistently near the top of the league in average exit velocity.



15. **MICHAEL WACHA** Padres SP*

16. **JEIMER CANDELARIO** Cubs 3B

17. **JORGE POLANCO** Twins 2B*

18

CLAYTON KERSHAW Dodgers SP

It’s fair to wonder how much the 35-year-old lefty has left in the tank. He had a 2.46 ERA this year, but his workhorse days are long gone: A shoulder injury kept him out six weeks, and he wasn’t the same after returning. Kershaw is headed for Cooperstown, but concern over whether he’s capable of lasting into October is warranted.

19. **LUCAS GIOLITO** Guardians SP

20. **MITCH GARVER** Rangers C/DH

21. **CRAIG KIMBREL** Phillies RP

22. **J.D. MARTINEZ** Dodgers DH

23. **JORGE SOLER** Marlins OF*

24. **JORDAN HICKS** Blue Jays RP

25. **KENTA MAEDA** Twins SP

26. **MARK CANHA** Brewers OF*

27. **KYLE HENDRICKS** Cubs SP*



28. **REYNALDO LÓPEZ** Guardians RP

After a slow start with the White Sox, López thrived after trades to the Angels and Guardians: In 25 games with them he had a 1.50 ERA with a 31% K rate. He’ll be 30 next year and is primed to anchor a bullpen.

29. **MICHAEL LORENZEN** Phillies SP

30. **TIM ANDERSON** White Sox SS*

31. **AROLDIS CHAPMAN** Rangers RP

STEPH CHAMBERS/GETTY IMAGES (HERNÁNDEZ); BRANDON SLOTER/IMAGE OF SPORT/GETTY IMAGES (LÓPEZ)



32. **JOC PEDERSON** Giants OF

33. **SETH LUGO** Padres SP*

34. **KYLE GIBSON** Orioles SP

35. **JOSH BELL** Marlins IF*

36. **KEVIN KIERMAIER** Blue Jays OF

37. **NICK MARTINEZ** Padres SP/RP*

38. **JACK FLAHERTY** Orioles SP

39. **AMED ROSARIO** Dodgers IF

40. **CHARLIE MORTON** Braves SP*

41. **JASON HEYWARD** Dodgers OF

By recording a 121 wRC+ for the Dodgers, Heyward tied his second-best mark in a full season. His revival at age 34 showed he can handle the heavy side of a platoon in right field, where the five-time Gold Glove winner is still an above-average defender. The concern: Will he look the same away from L.A.'s stellar coaching or revert to how he hit in Chicago—poorly—for so long?

42. **HECTOR NERIS** Astros RP*

43. **HUNTER RENFROE** Reds OF

44. **WADE MILEY** Brewers SP*

45. **GARY SÁNCHEZ** Padres C

46. **MIKE CLEVINGER** White Sox SP*

47. **ADAM DUVALL** Red Sox OF

48. **ANDREW HEANEY** Rangers SP*

49. **MICHAEL CONFORTO** Giants OF*

50. **BRANDON BELT** Blue Jays IF



By **CHRIS MANNIX**
Photograph by **Jeffery A. Salter**

THE WALKER

SAY HE'S A ***BAD GUY***. IT DOESN'T BOTHER HIM.



DILLON BROOKS

IS NOT ONLY EMBRACING HIS ROLE
AS THE MAN NBA FANS—AND OTHER
PLAYERS—LOVE TO HATE,
HE'S ALSO USING IT TO FUEL HIS GAME

credit
karma



CALL HIM a villain. Dillon Brooks doesn't care. Say he's arrogant, a bully, toxic to a team. He's heard it, read it, doesn't think much of it. "Everyone wants to hate on something," says Brooks.

Say that he caused the Grizzlies' first-round elimination from the playoffs last April because early in the series against the Lakers he had the gall to publicly poke LeBron James. He thinks it's stupid, but whatever. "We didn't have our whole squad, and they did," says Brooks. "People forgot about that. Just threw it on me." The bad guy? Villain Brooks? He doesn't want the label. But he'll wear it. "Everyone can't be the hero," says Brooks. "I'd rather be what was chosen for me."

Chosen. On this point, Brooks is emphatic. He didn't dream of being scorched on a podcast by Draymond Green, scuffling with Donovan Mitchell or engaging in a brief blood feud with James. At Oregon, Brooks's viral moment was being admonished by Duke's Mike Krzyzewski in the handshake line after he took a late three in a blowout NCAA tournament win. "His fault," says Brooks. He didn't set out to be an enforcer. And a villain? "Not really," says Brooks. "Because villains never win."

Peel back the layers, though, and you'll find a story more inspirational. A pudgy seventh grader turned high school star. A prep player who became a Division I prospect. A starter at Oregon who led his team to the Final Four. A second-round pick who made an NBA roster. A role player who has become one of the league's top defenders. "He is the poster child for a guy who literally worked his way into the NBA," says Mike Mennenga, a longtime Oregon assistant.

Last summer Brooks was part of the Canada team that finished third at the FIBA World Cup. In the bronze medal game against the U.S., Brooks ripped off 39 points, and he was named the tournament's top defensive player. Team Canada coach Jordi Fernandez suggested those who don't like the way Brooks plays "don't like basketball."

That story doesn't get much attention, of course. Some of that's on Brooks. Most of it, really. *He* started the feud with Green, telling ESPN in the spring, "I don't like Draymond at all," and saying that Green would be nothing if he weren't a Warrior. *He* sparked the scuffle with Mitchell in February when he swung his arm wildly and hit the Cleveland guard in the groin. (Mitchell retaliated by throwing the ball at Brooks and charging at him.) *He* stood in front of his locker after Game 2 of Memphis's opening-round series against the Lakers and dismissed some on-court jawing with James by saying he didn't care because LeBron was old. "I poke bears," Brooks said. Turns out, they poke back: The Lakers won three of the next four after that, with James clinching Game 4 with a driving layup into Brooks's chest.

Indeed, Brooks's basketball wounds are largely self-inflicted. Durable, 6' 6" wing defenders are coveted in today's NBA. There's a reason the Grizzlies let one of the best walk away.

In late September, inside a chilly gym at McNeese State, where the Rockets opened training camp, Brooks squeezes into a straight-backed seat in the bleachers. Houston, desperate to improve defensively, signed Brooks, 27, to a four-year, \$86 million contract in July. Of the end in Memphis, Brooks is bothered but unapologetic. "It wasn't what I wanted," he says. "The whole season was not what I wanted. I feel like we did better when I was a focal point in that organization. They chose a different route. But I'm happy that through all the bulls--- I was able to get what I always deserved."

In Memphis, Brooks was part of a contender. In Houston, he will try to help build one. Anyone expecting a different player, though, will be disappointed. There was no epiphany. There will be no changed man. (In the Rockets' preseason opener, Brooks was ejected after five minutes for—stop us if you have heard this before—whacking Indiana's Daniel Theis below the belt.) "[The Grizzlies] relished the way I played because it made everybody play harder, play better, play with a certain swagger," says Brooks. "That's what I'm going to bring in this team. That's how we're going to play."

CALL IT. I DARE YOU

Faced with excessive whistles, Brooks adopted an interesting [but successful] strategy to cut down on fouls: fouling more.

EAST PRESTON, NOVA SCOTIA, is a seaside town on the eastern shore of Halifax, a historically Black community nestled on the coast of a predominantly white country. Brooks's basketball roots trace to Mississauga, the Toronto suburb where Brooks was raised by his mother, Diane. His toughness and physicality? That comes from East Preston, where his father, Wayne, grew up.

"City boy," is what they called Brooks there. He hated that. "I always wanted to be a country boy," says Brooks. "Rough around the edges." As a youth, summers were spent in Nova Scotia. There was a little basketball and a lot of fighting. "Grimy," is how Brooks describes it. But he loved it. "I got to see my family, my roots," he says. "Seeing where my dad was from, the grind he went through. It taught me that you always have to go get what you want."

As a teenager, Brooks was, by most accounts, doughy. "He was out of shape," says Mennenga, who has known Brooks since middle school. He recalls coaches pushing Brooks toward football, but he preferred to compete with Jamal Murray, Andrew Wiggins and other up-and-comers in the Canadian pipeline. "He wasn't having it," Mennenga says. "He had the DNA of a competitor. His mind, even back then, was locked in on becoming the guy he is today."

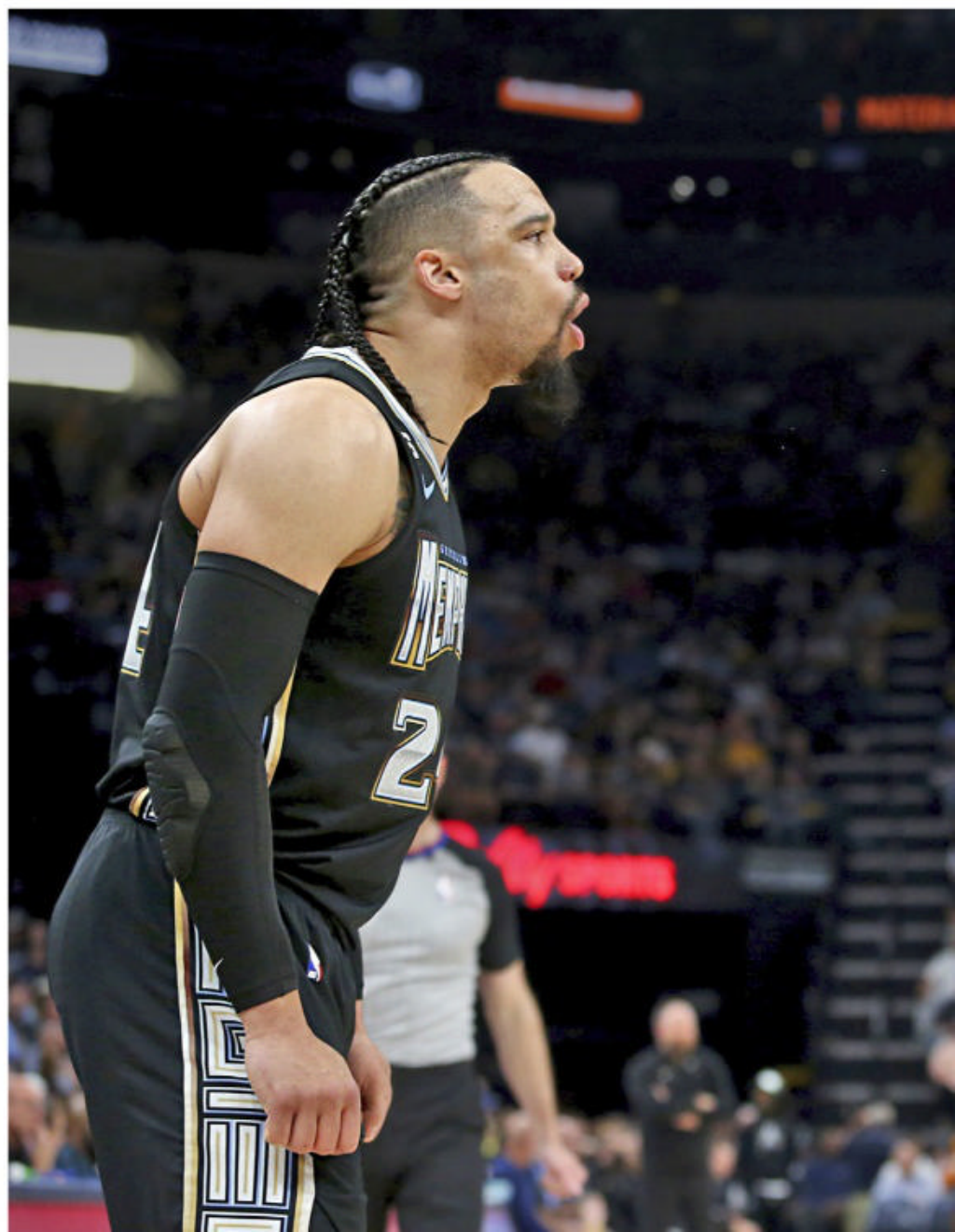
Brooks spent three years at Father Henry Carr High, just outside of Toronto. Before his senior year, in 2013, he transferred to Findlay Prep, outside of Las Vegas. Playing behind Kelly Oubre Jr., Brooks averaged 8.4 points per game. Oregon, though, loved his energy. Taking charges. Diving for loose balls. Reaching for deflections. "We needed that," says Ducks coach Dana Altman. "Everyone wants to score. He tried to make winning plays."

At Oregon, Brooks underwent a transformation. His body changed. Offensively, the Ducks played fast. Defensively, they pressed. Conditioning became a focus. The cakes, cookies and candy that were part of his high school diet? Gone. He became a fixture in the weight room. As a freshman, Brooks had 17% body fat. By the end of his junior year, it was down to 8%. "He's a basketball monk," says Mennenga. "He lives and breathes it. It's a lifestyle."

Brooks dived into film study. He devoured scouting reports. "He knew everyone's tendencies," says Mennenga. In Oregon's matchup zone defense, Brooks, says Mennenga, "was our middle linebacker." His competitiveness was contagious. His sophomore year, the Ducks advanced to the Elite Eight. The next year, they made the Final Four. Before the regional final matchup against Kansas, there was a nervous energy in the locker room. Brooks gathered



FROM TOP: JOHN W. MCDONOUGH; PETRE THOMAS/USA TODAY SPORTS



OLD NEWS

When Brooks barked at LeBron, there was precedent for him taking on hoops icons: He'd gone at Coach K and Duke seven years earlier.

the team together. On the wall there was a sign. ROAD TO PHOENIX, it read. *We're going*, Brooks said. *Whatever it takes*. The Ducks beat Kansas by 14, holding the Jayhawks to 35% shooting from the floor. "We had some competitive guys," says Altman. "But Dillon was definitely the instigator."

In 2017, Brooks declared for the NBA draft. The Pac-12 Player of the Year, Brooks hoped to be a first-rounder. But there were concerns about his length. His athleticism. His attitude. NBA draft.net wrote that it was "uncertain whom he will be able to guard at the next level." *Crazy*, Mennenga thought. "He can press a superhuman button and do things you feel like his body is not capable of doing," he says. On draft night, Brooks slipped to the middle of the second round, where the Grizzlies snapped him up.

In Memphis, Brooks started over. David Fizdale, then the Grizzlies' coach, was blunt. If Brooks was going to stick,

he had to defend. Brooks listened. He doubled down on scouting. Two hours in the film room. Took the iPad home at night. He focused on discipline. "Guys in this league are really good at drawing fouls," says Brooks. And he was determined to be physical. In his third season, Brooks led the league in fouls committed. The next year, same thing. His thinking: *If I play physical all the time, eventually referees will have to let some of it go*. "If they are going to keep calling fouls on me because I'm playing physical within the game, then it's going to look bad on them," says Brooks. Last season he averaged 3.3 fouls per game, the lowest in a full season since his rookie year.

He grew to love his role. Offense comes and goes. Defensively, Brooks reasoned, he could make an impact every night. "I'm not a LeBron or a Kawhi Leonard," says Brooks. "I'm not a freak athlete. I'm just another human

BROOKS NEVER WANTED THE BAD GUY LABEL, BUT HE'LL WEAR IT. "EVERYONE WANTS TO HATE ON SOMETHING," HE SAYS. "EVERYONE CAN'T BE THE HERO. I'D RATHER BE WHAT WAS CHOSEN FOR ME."



being, like everyone else. But I play hard. Harder than most people. Guys are used to them bowing down to them, thinking they are LeBron or Damian Lillard or Paul George. To me they are regular humans, like me, with strengths you have got to cut off."

BROOKS WANTS to clarify something. The criticism *did* bother him. For a while, anyway. Days after the Grizzlies' season ended, Brooks tumbled down a social media rabbit hole. He read the comments on Instagram. On X, he scrolled through the replies. He saw everything. Machine Gun Kelly dropping his name in a freestyle ("Come back like LeBron and drop 40 on you like I should"). James, quoting Jay-Z lyrics, dissing him. ("Unlike you little 🍌 I'm a grown ass man.") Anonymous followers burying him. "LA Fitness Draymond," one wrote. "Tired wrestling heel," posted another. Suggestions that Brooks's next stop would be in China had the Shanghai Sharks trending. "That's when I realized how big the Lakers were, how big LeBron James is," says Brooks. He shrugs. "It's part of my life. It's going to make me a better player."

Brooks hoped Memphis would support him. Instead, the franchise cut him loose. At a season-ending press conference, Grizzlies GM Zach Kleiman declined to address Brooks's future. Days later, *The Athletic* reported the team informed Brooks he wouldn't be back "under any circumstances." In March, Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins had called Brooks the

HOUSTON'S PROBLEM

The Rockets, who were 29th in defensive efficiency last year, are counting on Brooks to provide an immediate upgrade.



physicality. His unwillingness to back down. He didn't mind the chirping. "What I embrace, which may not have been embraced at other places," says Udoka. In Boston, Udoka had Marcus Smart, a versatile, defensive weapon Udoka could deploy at multiple positions. (Smart, ironically, has replaced Brooks in Memphis.) Udoka envisions using Brooks the same way. "The way he plays on the court is going to up the level defensively," says Udoka. "He sets the tone for your whole team. It's one guy you don't have to worry about on that end."

Which isn't to say Brooks can't be better. He needs to be less hotheaded. More controlled, on the floor and off. Make sure his passion for the game doesn't take away from it. He knows it. Altman told him. His experience last postseason helped crystallize it. "It really helped me understand—pick and choose your words," says Brooks. "Choose the right words. Don't just word vomit."

In Memphis, Brooks's shot selection was shaky. He shot 39.6% last season, a career low. He connected on 32.6% of his threes. Those numbers dipped to 31.2% and 23.8% in the playoffs. At the World Cup, he was better. He made 59.4% of his shots with Team Canada, including 58.8% of his threes. In training camp, Brooks made an impression

"THE WAY HE PLAYS ON THE COURT IS GOING TO UP THE LEVEL DEFENSIVELY," SAYS UDOKA. "HE SETS THE TONE FOR YOUR WHOLE TEAM. IT'S ONE GUY YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT ON THAT END."

player who "epitomizes" the program. By May, that program wanted him gone. "What I didn't like about Memphis was they allowed that so they can get out of the woodwork, and then I'm the scapegoat of it all," says Brooks. "That's what I didn't appreciate. And then ultimately they'll come to me on the low, as men, one on one and tell me something, but then not defend me when everything went down."

In Houston, team officials watched with interest. For months, the Rockets had studied Brooks. They needed defenders. The Grizzlies finished in the top six in efficiency in each of the last three seasons, with Brooks regularly guarding opposing teams' top perimeter players. They needed veterans. Winning veterans, preferably. Memphis made the playoffs in each of the last three seasons. The swagger, the confidence, the attitude? Houston, with win totals in recent years that looked like locker combinations, desired that, too. "Fundamentally, we want the player we saw in Memphis," says Rockets GM Rafael Stone. "The aggression, the competitiveness, the willingness to do whatever it takes. That's what's attractive to us."

To new coach Ime Udoka as well. After accepting the Rockets job in April, Udoka pondered Brooks. He liked his

on Houston's young core. His message to them is what he told himself in high school, in college, in the NBA: Every day, try to get 1% better.

And Memphis? In September, at the Rockets' media day, Brooks had a chance to turn the page. He could have punted on questions about the Grizzlies. Shifted the conversation to Houston. Nope. He said the Grizzlies' decision to move on left a "big chip" on his shoulder. He called getting four games against Memphis—the first coming Nov. 22, in Houston—"amazing." He said the games were "circled on my list."

That's Brooks. Once, he wanted to win a championship in Memphis. Now, his experience there fuels him. "It prepared me for what I'm about to be this season," says Brooks. "Taking my game to a new level, my body, my mind to a new level. Cutting out the bulls--- and just hooping. I've got a team that wants me, that wants me to help them grow." He pauses, circling back to a term he used earlier. *Focal point*. He thought he was that in Memphis. He knows he is in Houston. "For years to come," adds Brooks.

Villains always lose in movies. In the NBA, they just might win. □

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UNFATHOMIA



BLE LOSS

By **GREG BISHOP**

Photograph by
KOHJIRO KINNO

LEGAL FIGHT

Steve and Gina Meyer have filed a wrongful death suit against Stanford, alleging that the school didn't support their daughter in a time of crisis.

Elite goalkeeper, soccer captain, a star in the classroom: **KATIE MEYER** was seemingly the model Stanford student.

But after she took her own life last year, her parents came to believe that the school failed her—and should be held accountable so more kids aren't put at risk



THE DEBUT PODCAST dropped just before Valentine's Day 2022. Katie Meyer recorded it inside a conference room on Stanford's campus, alongside her father, Steve. This episode, she hoped, would capture the desired tone of future editions of *Be the Mentality*. She'd feature young, ambitious, accomplished athletes and anyone who supported their aims.

Katie called her dad "my guy" as she walked through his life. From small-town Iowa, a college deejay and three-time state horseshoes champion, he met her mother in college at a Greek mythology final.

"Did you study?" Katie asked.

"I studied her."

"Ewwwww, gross!"

The podcast sounds heavier now, over a year later, as Steve watches clips on his iPhone. His legs shake involuntarily, and tears form in his eyes.

Deeper in the episode, Katie turned toward youth soccer. The Cardinal goalie wanted to make U.S. national teams so badly as a teenager that she perpetually left family, friends and schools to attend tryout camps. "That creates such an interesting perception of reality in your mind," she said. The competitive crucible split her life into two separate worlds. One: soccer star and honors student at Newbury Park High in Thousand Oaks, Calif. The other: elite but late-blooming USWNT hopeful. Not making a U-17 World Cup team marked the greatest disappointment of her life.



FAMILY GOALS

Katie (with parents and sisters) was a force in life and on the pitch—like when she was stopping PKs in the 2019 NCAA final (top).

"I thought my world was ending . . . crashing down. . . I'm the biggest failure . . . so ashamed and terrified, because my entire identity was being 'that' soccer player," she said.

Katie came from a family that didn't do anything halfway, that lived and loved, its impact spreading all over Southern California. The exchange that night on the "Middle Daughter + Parents" group chat, all *thank you* and *love you* and heart emoji, was proof of the bonds forged through endless activity.

COURTESY OF THE MEYER FAMILY



Near the episode's end, Katie pulled out a letter Steve had written two years earlier, on the eve of college soccer's national semifinals. When Stanford advances that far in the postseason, its coaches invoke a tradition, asking parents to write to their children.

Steve watches now on his phone as Katie, on the podcast, began to read his letter out loud. He starts to cry. He looks thinner, lighter and happier in the video. He watches himself tell Katie that, no, life is not easy; players need supporters, advocates, champions to navigate social media negativity, outsized expectations and existences barreling so fast, in so many directions, that there's no time to breathe. "Someone has to be a net," she said, reading her father's words.

She asked for one final nugget of wisdom. His answer: After failing, continue to move forward, however unsteadily, with an open mind. Unforeseen opportunities will roll in.

At that moment his words seemed charming, like sound advice. Today, they're haunting. Katie never recorded another episode.

Two weeks later, she died by suicide.

THE MORNING OF Tuesday, March 1, 2022, began like any other in the Meyer household. Steve grabbed coffee and took the dogs out. For 25 years, he had worked in Hollywood, starting as a production assistant before rising to writer for shows like *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Hannah Montana*.

When COVID-19 halted the entertainment industry, Steve picked up an Uber Eats delivery gig. On this morning, before getting in his dented, messy, light-blue Prius, he partook in a favorite ritual: sending video of two scrambling, panting dogs to the "Smart Family" group chat.

Away at Stanford, Katie always found time to reply to these texts, even if only with a heart emoji. But today she did not.

She must be really busy, thought Gina, her mom. They knew she was. Everyone did. Ambition powered Katie. Stanford senior. Starting goalkeeper. Team captain. Not to mention: honors student with plans to attend law school. She applied only to Stanford.

The family had spoken to Katie the night before, over FaceTime. She complimented her younger sister Siena's makeup and updated Gina on the previous week. She was recovering well from a recent knee surgery . . . anticipating her spring break in Tulum, Mexico . . . enrolling in classes for her final college quarter the next day. Older sister Samantha, a teacher, rushed in and announced her car had been broken into. Steve made a wave-hello cameo between drop-offs. All saw Katie as *Katie*: happy, vibrant, juggling, capable.

As Steve waited for the text response that never came, he had a premonition. He had them regularly, sometimes about Katie. He would feel an urge to drive to Stanford and check in. This time, the impulse felt stronger. He parked in front of Sally Beauty, a supply store near their home. His cellphone

buzzed. He didn't answer. It buzzed again. Same number. *Ignore*. When it buzzed once more, he picked up. It was Katie's friend from Stanford, and he was so hysterical Steve could hardly understand him. But two words cut through.

"She's gone!" the friend screamed, over and over.

TO PIECE TOGETHER Katie's story, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED spent dozens of hours with the Meyer family; reviewed hundreds of pages of documents; interviewed more than a dozen of her teammates, coaches and friends; and spoke with experts on mental health and college discipline. The findings raise

and damages for, among other charges, wrongful death. Stanford declined to comment to SI but has declared in legal filings and in a news release that "we strongly disagree with any assertion that the university is responsible for her death." (The school has also denied communication lapses with the Meyers and said it worked with them on statements about Katie.)

Now, the central argument in case No. 22CV407844 will play out in court: Did Stanford, Katie Meyer's oasis, the engine for her driving ambition and home for most of her final four years, fail her?

A FLEETING INCIDENT HAD SUDDENLY MORPHED INTO A MAJOR ISSUE FOR KATIE. THE INVESTIGATION, ONE TEAMMATE SAYS, INSTILLED FEAR THAT "EVERYTHING STANFORD MEANT TO HER WOULD BE TAKEN AWAY."

important questions about how Stanford dealt with its star goalkeeper and whether its policies hurt its students.

The Meyers' search for answers started on the day she died, as a handful of teammates and friends began to fill in Steve and Gina. Katie had hidden an incident from her family for months. It started with a teammate alleging that she had received an unwanted kiss from a football player on Aug. 20, 2021. Then, according to court documents and confirmed in several interviews, eight days later, Katie happened by the football player while riding her bike through campus, and she spilled hot coffee on him. Katie, in her communications with Stanford's Office of Community Standards (OCS), said she fell off her bike and that the spilled coffee was an accident—that she didn't know the person it landed on. But according to a letter from Stanford's disciplinary arm, the football player said she had intentionally poured it on his back. On Sept. 16, the OCS launched an investigation. Katie was informed the next day. The office interviewed her shortly afterward—and began talking to others as well.

A fleeting incident had suddenly morphed into a major issue. The investigation, one teammate says, instilled fear that "everything Stanford meant to her would be taken away."

In the wake of Katie's death, Steve and Gina found communication from the school lacking. They say they had trouble accessing Katie's records and were put off by the clinical tone of Stanford's statements. But that disappointment paled in comparison to their shock over what they would learn about Stanford's disciplinary process.

The family filed its complaint against Stanford, and a number of its officials and administrators in Santa Clara Superior Court on Nov. 23, 2022, seeking injunctive relief



CARDINAL WINS

After Stanford beat North Carolina in a shootout for the 2019 national title, Katie celebrated with her close friend Girma (above).

GINA GAVE birth to Katie, the second of three daughters, in 2000. Right away, Katie struck both her parents as fearless. She scaled tall trees and leapt off; transformed living rooms into obstacle courses; adored animals, *Star Wars* and Lego.

Gina taught her careful planning and tireless execution. Steve drilled *protect the meek*, a favorite phrase, and to be decisive and kind. Katie became a star goalkeeper and, for one season, a kicker on her high school football team. She embraced goofy excursions (afternoon tea, anyone?) and aced her classes. But nothing called to her like soccer.

She joined her first team at age 5, so determined—and so in love with *The Lion King*—that she sometimes literally roared at opponents. She moved to club soccer by 9 and switched from forward to goalkeeper. Soon she joined travel teams and state teams and qualified for the U-16 national team.

Her position fit Katie like the gloves that snuggled both her hands. She made diving stops and sprinted *toward* attackers, dismissing bruises and ripped skin and jammed fingers (and one broken toe). She wasn't the tallest goalie,

but she was quick, agile, athletic. "Born to play keeper," says Steve, who also works as a private soccer coach. "The different textures of her personality folded into that position."

When Katie was young, Steve once accidentally blasted her in the chest with a wayward shot. He stared back in amazement when she screamed, "That all you got?"

Soccer gave Katie purpose, popularity and acclaim. She fell for her future university on her initial visit, at age 15, carving an "S" into a pumpkin that Halloween. In Stanford, she saw all the spaces she planned to conquer. The soccer field. The classroom, where she planned to study international relations and one day become *president of the United States*. The campus, where she was endlessly involved.

For Katie, anything seemed possible. Especially at Stanford.

ON THAT TERRIBLE Tuesday, Steve pointed the family north in their white SUV, destination Palo Alto, same as usual and like never before. The sounds in the car haunt still. Screams, sobs, deep breaths, hyperventilating, swearing, praying, comforting, questioning. The silent stretches were even worse, as four brains spun in four million directions. Steve hoped: *Maybe everyone has it wrong*. All considered the obvious yet unanswerable question.

Why didn't she call me?

The next morning, the Meyers went to Katie's dorm room, accompanied by a Stanford Student Care liaison. Bed, made; cellphone, laid next to her computer; everything clean and tidy. At that point Katie's family knew what happened, but not why. The room, at first, provided little in way of clues.

They looked through her belongings: portable speaker, tapestry, small plants, pictures, coffee table, books, LSAT study guide. Looking back, they can see that this tiny room gave them unexpected gifts. "Like everything was *her*," Gina says. "Her smell. Her vibe. Very . . . peaceful."

They couldn't grieve; there simply wasn't time. Steve and Gina spoke in public, surrounded by hundreds holding candles on Stanford's soccer field. They addressed Katie's teammates privately, emphasizing that Katie loved them, saw them as warrior queens and sisters. When they cleaned out her locker, Siena nabbed a captain's armband. She still carries it in her backpack.

The Meyers held a visitation that Friday at a local mortuary. With no time to plan, they limited the guest list to teammates, coaches and relatives. When the rest of the crowd departed, the immediate Meyer family stayed behind to say goodbye. Katie lay there, in a casket, clad in her Stanford soccer uniform. Each member of her family approached with a rose and placed it on her body. Some leaned in for a final hug. Gina followed Steve to the casket, rubbing Katie's forehead and stroking her hair. This was the first time they had seen her body. Each family member kissed her forehead.

They didn't finish packing until Monday, when they left campus, broken but still intact. Steve drove the rented



U-Haul home, mind spinning. Katie's ashes rested in a box below the passenger seat. Her remains were soon placed into necklaces for her sisters and spread off the Florida Gulf Coast and in her grandfather's backyard outside Chicago. They will be taken on family trips, whenever those resume, and dispersed in Katie's favorite park, near the Stanford campus and at a beloved beach where she surfed.

STANFORD'S OFFICE OF Community Standards operates as the school's disciplinary arm for most cases. It is run by administrative staff who investigate and prosecute cases, while a panel of faculty, students and staff sit in judgment.

The Meyers' complaint against Stanford echoes many other criticisms of its disciplinary arm and the school's pressure-cooker atmosphere. In 2019, the student newspaper, the *Stanford Daily*, reported that a psychiatric ward near campus admitted between one and three students a week. From '19 to now, at least nine Stanford students have died by suicide.

Two independent analyses—from the Student Justice Project (2012), a group of Stanford students, parents and alumni, and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education ('20)—found a host of problems with Stanford's disciplinary system, including slow response times and poor communication.

"It's a system that presumes guilt," says Bob Otilie, a lawyer and one of the SJP founders. After issuing his report, at first privately to Stanford, his group met with school administrators. Officials engaged, Otilie says, for seven months. But, he adds, "Literally, nothing changed." In May 2013, the

Otilie represented told him that when he asked Stanford whether he needed a lawyer, an OCS official told him hiring one for representation would be "used against you." (Stanford did not respond to questions about Otilie's statements.)

In 2019, Stanford created the Committee of 10 to review its Student Judicial Charter (drafted in 1896) and Honor Code (written in 1921). The committee filed an interim report in April 2021, about a year before Katie's death. It contained many of the same findings about Stanford discipline, including that the process took too long, even for minor violations.

HIDEKI NAKADA SERVED as Stanford's assistant coach and goalkeeper specialist from 2014 to '21. Katie, he says, "was the epitome of what we wanted."

Nakada understood why Katie viewed redshirting in her freshman season of 2018 as a personal affront. When he relayed the staff's decision, she broke down, crying on the field. On the podcast, Katie said the moment reminded her of the national team she didn't make. "I was ready," she said. "Because if I put my mind to something, why not?"

She returned to Stanford the next summer and declared she would start. Her best friends on the team, Sierra Enge and Naomi Girma, liked her chances. Girma, now a U.S. women's national team star, had met Katie years earlier, at a national team youth camp, and was "in awe of her boldness." As the season began, Katie split the starting duties. She seized the gig full time midway through the year.

When the Cardinal advanced to the national semifinals in 2019, Steve sat down and wrote his letter. He started with

KATIE, HER FORMER GOALKEEPING COACH AT STANFORD SAYS, "WAS THE EPITOME OF EVERYTHING WE WANTED."

SJP started publicizing the report. It hammered the OCS for failing to provide due process and said its officers used their positions to intimidate students. Stanford responded by criticizing the study as flawed. So the SJP produced a second report in '13, this time including 24 testimonials from students. Each described trauma, depression, anxiety and more born from the disciplinary process.

The SJP offered recommendations—like free representation for the accused—but Otilie says the school met them with "hostility." Stanford does allow for trained, independent advisers called "judicial counselors" to assist students. The counselors can be faculty, staff or students, but are not professionals. Otilie thinks the advocates should be able to operate more like lawyers.

Katie did not choose to have a counselor. One student

the little girl whose father sat her on a giant picnic table at a dog park near their house. He did this for two reasons: so she could look out at the amazing world around her and so she could, if she wanted, sail through the air, into his arms. But maybe, he wrote, there was a third reason. That girl was developing her boldness, the trust she needed to leap.

That little girl is strong from the inside out, and she . . . lives within you. Approach this weekend with the bold spirit of that little girl. Get way up on the picnic table. . . . And then, yes, LEAP.

Katie sent him a text message: "Your letter made me cry." He shot back three rows of eight heart emoji.

Stanford played rival UCLA in the semifinals. Katie had chosen the Cardinal over the Bruins, and the early goal she allowed opened a can of trash talk. UCLA star forward Mia Fishel called out, "It's the keeper." But in the

42nd minute, Katie stood in goal, between Fishel and the net. Fishel ripped a short, hard liner toward the bottom-right corner. Meyer inched left, then exploded that way, blocking the attempt with both hands. While the crowd roared, Meyer sauntered up to Fishel, eyes ablaze, blond ponytail bobbing. “Is it the keeper?” she asked. Stanford won 4–1.

Forty-eight hours later, before the national title game

A TEAMMATE’S LEGACY

Girma [4] dedicated her journey to the Women’s World Cup to Katie and pledged to raise awareness of mental health issues.



against powerhouse North Carolina, Katie delivered a speech to her teammates in their locker room. Her voice grew so loud the coaches could hear every word from the next room. Their destiny had already been written. They had toiled, survived and fought for *this*. All they needed to do was sign the document they’d already authored. At the crescendo, she yelled, “Make it official.” Teammates screamed and hollered. “I felt invincible,” Katie said on her podcast.

After a goal-less regulation and overtime, the game went to penalty kicks. Katie, naturally, felt calm. Nakada pulled her aside and reminded her, “This is why you came to Stanford.”

Hell yeah, it was.

“Remember?” Steve asked on her podcast. Of course. When she was 15 or so, the father of the other goalie from her first PK shootout came up to Katie after she won,

expressing awe at how easily she guessed where attempts were headed. “I DON’T GUESS,” Katie responded.

Against the Tar Heels, she blocked the first attempt, diving right. With the teams still tied after five attempts each, she noticed the shooter’s hip shift before ball met foot. She dived left, blocking the shot. *I DON’T GUESS*, true as ever. She stalked toward the stands, thumping her chest. When a successful Stanford kick clinched the victory, Katie piled on her teammates. Then she took a moment alone, patting the grass beneath the goal and fighting back tears. She left her championship ring and replica trophy with her parents. That night, she took back to campus only one thing.

The letter her dad wrote. She would frame it.

COVID-19 COST the Cardinal most of their 2020 season, with the team finishing its abbreviated schedule at an uneven 6-6-2. Katie vowed the next season would be different.

She dived more deeply into everything in her senior year. She hunkered down to study for the LSAT. She cofounded a cheering armada at Stanford sporting events, helping rebrand the student section as The Forest. She fought for LGBTQ rights as part of an advocacy group, Cardinal Pride, consisting mainly of athletes. She was one of four Cardinal athletes chosen to deliver a TEDx Talk and wanted to become the first keeper selected in the first round of the NWSL draft.

Katie dreamed out loud, her future divided into Act I (professional soccer), Act II (lawyer, specializing in international relations) and Act III (the presidential bid). Sometimes her most audacious ambition, becoming President Meyer, came across as a joke. But confidants knew she meant it.

From the day they dropped her off to that horrific morning in March 2022, Steve believed Katie had found her place at Stanford. The university appeared to agree. Her smiling face became the lead photograph on the Stanford Athletics Twitter page. After she died, the image came down.

KATIE FLEW HOME for Christmas in 2021. She trained at her favorite park with her father and younger sister, sang carols, opened presents. She admitted to stress only once that anyone can recall, when mentioning her still-pending law school application. She visited London during that winter break. In her journal, she wrote: *You’re living the dream. You’re in London, sitting in the most beautiful café in the park. . . . It’s a beautiful morning to be exactly where you are.*

But Katie didn’t tell her family everything. They found out later that she had been required to check a box on that application divulging that she was involved in a disciplinary proceeding. In a formal statement to the OCS she had sent the previous month, she had written that she was “terrified an accident will destroy my future.” She had been “scared for months,” she added, “that my clumsiness will ruin my chances of leaving on a good note.”

She also addressed life as a female athlete at a school like Stanford, where, she wrote, “male athletes are untouchable,

female athletes know one mistake can ruin everything.”

The football player alleged to have kissed her teammate without consent, it turns out, did not receive any discipline. (Sexual harassment and assault cases, like his, typically go before the Title IX office, not the OCS. Per U.S. government guidance, Title IX cases don’t move forward without survivor participation unless it is “clearly unreasonable” to drop the matter.)

Katie also described her assertiveness as *demonized*. A perfectionist, she had been terrified of making mistakes her entire life. *No alcohol, no speeding tickets, no A- marks*. “I have given everything to this school,” she wrote. “I love Stanford.”

On Nov. 12 she had met with Julie Sutcliffe, then the assistant director of sport psychology. Katie detailed elevating feelings of anxiety and depression, describing her mood as irritable, frustrated and down, according to Sutcliffe’s notes, referenced in the Meyers’ complaint against Stanford. Katie scheduled a follow-up for the next week but missed the

appointment after oversleeping from exhaustion, according to the complaint. She also saw Francesco Dandekar, the university’s associate director of sport psychology. According to the lawsuit, on Nov. 22 she told him she “was experiencing increased depression symptoms associated with perceived failure and [she reported] suicidal ideations.” (Dandekar did not respond to a request for comment.)

Stanford’s policy is that conversations between its students and its psychologists are confidential. For confidentiality to be broken, there must be an imminent threat of harm to oneself or others. The judgment call would have fallen to Dandekar as to whether Katie had met that threshold and he should alert others at Stanford of her condition. Kim Dougherty, the Meyer family lawyer, says the family believes the situation merited reporting. “There should have been communication,” she says. “There are supposed to be flags within the system.”

The next day, the lawsuit says, Katie met again with Sutcliffe, describing “worsening anxiety and mood and increased depression” coinciding with her interactions with the OCS. The lawsuit also states that, at the same time, she was having trouble filling her prescription for an ADHD medication. Though it is uncertain

PUSH AND PULL

While honoring Katie’s memory, Stanford has fought back against the Meyers’ lawsuit, strongly denying it’s to blame for her death.



whether Katie suffered from withdrawal symptoms from the drug, they can include feelings of depression and increased anxiety.

AFTER HANGING UP with her family on the evening of Feb. 28, 2022, Katie hopped on another FaceTime call, with Girma. They talked about which classes both should take, with enrollment starting the next day. Shortly after 7 p.m., Katie paused abruptly. She said to Girma, “Oh my god. They’re charging me.”

Katie hung up and continued reading the email that had landed in her inbox from the OCS dean telling her that she would shortly be receiving a “formal written notice” from her office. The charge: “Violation of the Fundamental Standard by spilling hot coffee on another student.” The notice ran five pages and listed potential witnesses in her case (some of whom have been redacted from the version that became public through court proceedings). Katie also had access to a case documents folder. According to the notice the OCS sent her, the folder included interview notes from meetings with both her and the football player as well as other interview notes and pieces of evidence (like text exchanges between the football player’s mother and

time, communication from the OCS was sporadic. Hearing little, Katie considered the saga over, according to four others at Stanford who knew her well. Administrators sent the formal OCS charge on the last day before the university’s statute of limitations would have closed the case. It was sent after hours, when offices that could help Katie deal with any aftershocks (fear, anxiety, dark thoughts) were closed.

Naomi R. Shatz, a lawyer at Zalkind, Duncan & Bernstein, in Boston, who represents students in similar cases, says Stanford’s actions reflect “very common” problems in school disciplinary systems. Specifically, Shatz cites the length of the case and the lack of communication between officials and Katie. She wondered to SI why Stanford did not at least notify her during normal business hours. Difficult messages should be delivered face-to-face, she says. In-person meetings allow disciplinary officials to gauge student reaction while giving immediate referrals for any counseling, treatment or support options available. The notice directed Katie to the “on-call dean” as a support resource. But that’s it.

“I’ve done a lot of these,” Dougherty says, “and I’ve not seen one other charge like this go out after hours.”

Katie replied immediately to the OCS, at 7:11 p.m., describing herself as “shocked and distraught.” Thirty-

SIX MONTHS HAD PASSED FROM THE DAY KATIE LEARNED OF THE OCS COMPLAINT. HEARING LITTLE, SHE HAD CONSIDERED THE SAGA OVER. SHE REPLIED IMMEDIATELY TO THE OCS, SAYING SHE WAS “SHOCKED AND DISTRAUGHT.”

his coach). None of these documents are public.

The Meyer family contends, in its lawsuit, that Katie consistently said the spill was an accident (and witnesses agreed). But Stanford was claiming in its notice that, according to its investigation, Katie had told others that she had dumped the coffee intentionally, to defend her teammate. The notice also said the football player had told investigators he believed the act was intentional, claiming that Katie briefly followed him on her bike, said something referencing the interaction with her teammate and seemed to be laughing as she rode away.

The notice said that violating Stanford’s fundamental standard of behavior could result in “removal” from the university. Per university policy, the college senior’s degree was put on hold, meaning that she could not graduate until the matter was resolved. Having redshirted, she still had soccer eligibility left and could have continued as Stanford captain if she were accepted to its law school. Now both those things were threatened.

Six months had passed from the day Katie learned of the OCS complaint to the night she received that letter. In that

seven minutes later, the university sent back a message to schedule a meeting. Katie responded to the last email within a minute, selecting a time in three days.

From the moment Stanford’s formal written notice had arrived, Katie found herself unsettled and alone. All while she was juggling several other stressors: her surgery, the pandemic, her team’s difficult season, her law school application.

According to the lawsuit, a forensic analysis of her computer showed that Katie “frantically toggled back and forth” among the letter, case documents and one internet search: how to defend herself against a disciplinary complaint. Katie read and reread statements from the player she had confronted, his mother, teammates, athletic trainer and football coach David Shaw, the complaint says.

Often in the case of suicide, families spend decades searching for *why*. The Meyers think they have theirs. In some ways that helps. In others it makes it harder.

What was Katie feeling? Steve and Gina can’t go there. Sitting on their patio, Gina places a hand on her husband’s leg. “That’s what I’m scared of,” he says. “To let that sit in

your head and think about what she was feeling right before she made that impulsive decision.”

“I just . . . I just . . . I can’t.”

HAS ANYTHING CHANGED at Stanford? A *Los Angeles Times* story in March 2022 reported that, in the preceding two years, the school had increased its clinical staff by 20%, and, following Katie’s death, promised to add more positions. Earlier this year, Stanford updated its honor code and judicial charter. The main headline had to do with how exams would be proctored, though. Otilie has advised three students in their disciplinary cases since Katie’s death and says most of the changes are window dressing. He believes that Katie’s alleged offense was a relatively minor one and should have been handled in a lower-stakes environment than the OCS.

The Meyers wake up every morning and choose to fashion what they can from the same grim reality. All in, still. They speak to groups—high school teams, soccer clubs, college teams and students—and cite statistics. Like: 125 Americans die by suicide every day. Or: It’s the second-leading cause of death for ages 15 to 24. They remind college athletes that, while they’re considered adults at 18, their brains aren’t fully

new mission since the day they returned from Palo Alto. The understanding between them is implicit and unsaid. Maybe they’re channeling her energy, her spirit.

“Maybe we’re supposed to be doing this,” Gina says. “Maybe Katie is passing the baton to us, like a sign from the universe.”

SOMETIMES, STEVE THINKS back to the day he and Gina dropped Katie off at Stanford as a freshman. They went for a walk around campus. Steve asked Katie for a selfie. He always did. She never said no, never seemed embarrassed. He pulled her close and wrapped her tightly. Letting go, he teared up.

His daughter comforted him. She always did that, too.

“Dad,” Katie said, “don’t be like that.”

“I can’t help it,” he said. “I’m so proud of you.”

He still heads to the park near their house that Katie loved, to manage his grief. Steve wants to go to that park now, so he does, with one dog tucked under his right arm and the other straining the leash in his left hand. It’s been nearly a year since that terrible Tuesday. His hair is long, on purpose, an homage to Katie. In the months ahead, Samantha will become pregnant with their first grandchild, while Siena

“MAYBE WE’RE SUPPOSED TO BE DOING THIS,” GINA SAYS OF HER AND STEVE’S ADVOCACY WORK. “MAYBE KATIE IS PASSING THE BATON TO US, LIKE A SIGN FROM THE UNIVERSE.”

developed until around 25. Then they segue into Katie’s story, saying how it drives them and the work of their foundation.

Katie’s Save is an initiative based on the principle of choice. The foundation provides the resources and paperwork necessary to help students select an empowered advocate to represent them in medical, emergency, academic or, yes, school disciplinary matters.

If only Katie had that . . . there’s the genesis. The Meyers want to hold Stanford accountable. They want the disciplinary system changed. They want to bludgeon stereotypes. But, more than anything, they want her back.

The Meyers amended their complaint to withdraw six of the eight initial counts in their lawsuit, but the core charge remains: wrongful death. In sum, the Meyers contend that Stanford’s disciplinary system drove Katie to a desperate act, and that the school had failed to care for her properly.

The case is currently plodding through the California legal system, as the Meyers seek discovery. The next court date, for a “Case Management Conference,” is in March.

Where they can’t go with Katie’s death propels Steve and Gina forward. They haven’t taken a break from their

will net another family soccer scholarship, from UCLA.

Steve and Katie spent hundreds of hours out here, forsaking fancier parks nearby for this field with chewed-up grass and dirt patches. Every time he visits, the memories return. The cones they set up for drills. The hill she ran for cardio.

Steve thought he’d never coach again. But he is, still. Like on the afternoon he rolled a soccer ball toward Siena for the first time since Katie’s death, then felt an intense vibration on the left side of his head. “It’s high-pitched, deep, rapid, confusing. Almost like a hummingbird went inside my ear.” When it ceased, a butterfly cruised by. Katie, right?

He’s pointing now. She did pull-ups over *there*. Set the speed ladder up over *there*.

The sun drops. He carved Katie’s initials into a tree, and they’ve taken on a green hue, a coincidence perhaps, but also the preferred color for mental health advocacy. In the same spot as always, he stares in the same direction.

Over the mountains of Los Padres National Forest.

Toward Palo Alto.

Toward Stanford.

And Katie. □



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BY
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REID'S WRITINGS

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When he was in college as a benchwarming lineman at BYU, **ANDY REID** moonlighted as a sportswriter—and the skills he demonstrated on that job informed a way of thinking that has helped make him one of the NFL's best coaches



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IN 1982, THE NFL WAS CHANGING,

although most scribes who covered professional football were years away from recognizing what a young sports-writer already saw. This author, big and beefy and already sporting a glorious red mustache, hailed from Los Angeles and moonlighted as a backup offensive tackle on the BYU football team. He wrote the following sentence, as part of a series of freelance articles for the *Provo Daily Herald*:

The name of the NFL game is pass.

The kid who wrote that sentence stood 6' 3", weighed around 230 pounds, accumulated zero college statistics and played only in spring games through three seasons. He majored in physical education. He counted Jim McMahon among his teammates.

This kid, with his notepad and his shoulder pads, his mustache and his pen stash, still wasn't sure what career he wanted. "Professional athlete" seemed improbable.

He found teachers—and their profession—inspiring. His father, Walter, was creative, a designer of movie sets; his mother, Elizabeth, analytical, a doctor with *caring* embedded in her soul. And he thought, way back then, that "writing for *Sports Illustrated* might be pretty cool."

He did not yet realize. He saw football like a . . . coach.

Reminded before this season started of that sentence he wrote nearly 31 years ago, the author chuckles over the phone from Kansas City. Practice had just wrapped up. "I know, I know," Andy Reid says. "That's just kinda what it was. I didn't know [the NFL] was gonna end up where it ended up."

So brash with the long-ago pen. So buttoned up now, at least in public. That's the difference between a man in charge of a possible burgeoning sports dynasty with the Chiefs and a kid hunting for a story. But one concept



speaks to both worlds, which bump up against each other and sometimes intersect. Perhaps writing about sports projected or even aided Andy Reid, winner of Super Bowls, offensive innovator, Hall of Fame shoo-in. Storytelling likely made him a better coach.

R **EID TRANSFERRED** from Glendale Junior College in sunny California to snowy BYU in 1978. He was not a writer, per se, but more of an intellect who doubled as a jock. Long before Andy channeled the creativity of his father, filling whiteboards with intricate play designs that resemble a human genome map, he simply followed what called to him.

But it's not as if Reid showed up on campus and went directly to the student newspaper, begging for bylines. The *Daily Herald* had an idea for him.

On the football field, Reid stood on the sidelines throughout historic seasons (led by McMahon, the Cougars went 12–1 in 1980) and cheered himself hoarse through indelible victories (like their Holiday Bowl triumph over SMU that year, in which they scored four touchdowns in the fourth quarter, the last on a Hail Mary as time expired). All the while, he studied the game's intricacies and nuances by observing up close LaVell Edwards, BYU's respected coach, then in the ninth year of a 29-year career.

While on the Cougars' roster (and later as a graduate assistant), Reid also penned at least 12 stories at the local paper. He wrote almost exclusively about the team he played for, which would have been frowned upon as recently as maybe 10 years ago but wouldn't be as hazardous to an aspiring hack today.

Using his knowledge of the program, he gravitated toward the kinds of topics that most sportswriters back then either overlooked or didn't have the perspective (or access) to adequately cover. Reid wrote about specialists and their importance—"nobody wrote about them. I saw an opening I could at least touch on." He wrote about coaches and how they operated, where they made a

*In both pursuits,
Reid was learning*

STORYTELLING

AND COACHING.

*He later would
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same thing.*

difference. He spoke with (and quoted) the scouts he'd later lean on when he became a coach.

His earliest writings featured an editor's note tacked above the byline. That wording changed (and in some cases, vanished) in later stories. But the most common version went, "Andy Reid is an offensive tackle on the BYU football team. Today he writes . . ."

Reid's work took on a variety of styles. He wrote columns. He wrote analysis. He also wrote mini profiles, trend stories and a little news. In one instance, he defended McMahon by comparing him to Abraham Lincoln.

"We were all friends," Reid says (meaning the Punky QB, not Honest Abe). "I was with all of them. Whatever kind of story, they understood."

In both pursuits, undertaken in the same time and place, Reid was learning storytelling and coaching. He later would come to realize that they're largely the same thing. Over the years, Reid's writing ambitions have been assigned a certain significance, a path he wanted rather than a realistic potential option. But Reid says, more simply, that he thought about a writing career. He didn't *dream* about one.

Still, curiosity defines him now, as it has through most of his life. Reid sometimes toiled as a peanut vendor at Dodger Stadium near his childhood home. He started journaling in his junior year of high school and wrote almost every day. He studied English at BYU. His parents gave him an SI subscription "when I was a pup." He adored Paul Zimmerman—"he was phenomenal," Reid says. He saw the estimable football scribe as a North Star of sorts. Dr. Z didn't just write about football. He analyzed the game through his writing, conversations and observations. Reid also tried to imitate Jim Murray, the iconic sports columnist at the *Los Angeles Times* whose use of humor informed Reid's stylistic leanings.

Already, Reid possessed critical skills needed for sportswriting. He understood the sport he wrote about, had a firm grasp of the subject matter. He also knew people within that world, meaning he had sources.

His copy from those *Daily Herald* pieces is clean: meaning mostly grammatically correct, solidly stitched together and illuminating in places, with only a few typos or obvious mistakes.

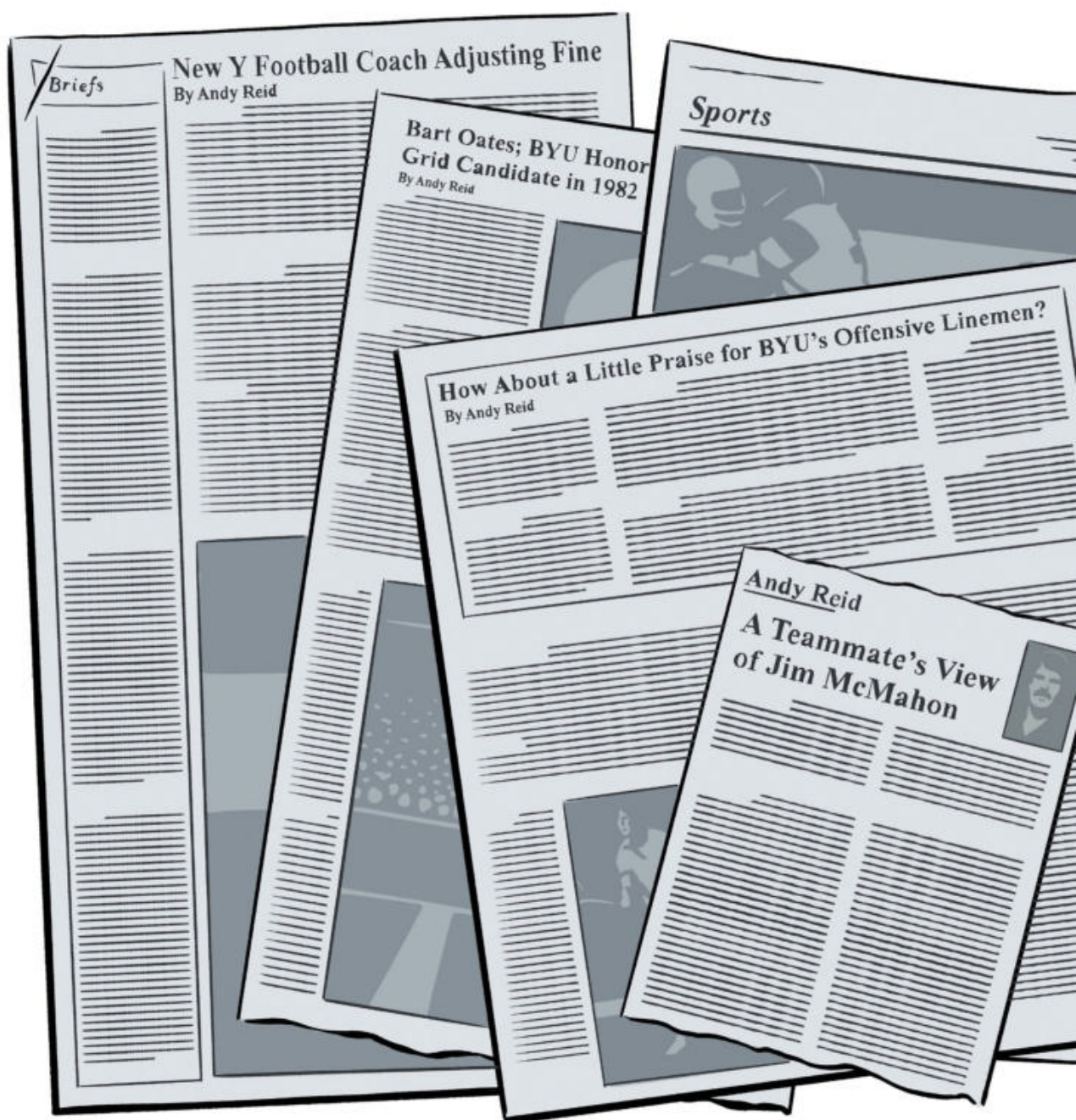
Reid's opportunity with the *Daily Herald* came when a writer—who traveled with the team and knew that Reid dabbled in the written word—asked him whether he wanted to occasionally cross the street. Reid made up his process as he went along. He came up with his own ideas. He reported them (but not in a ton of depth). He tapped out his pieces on a typewriter. And, he says, they were lightly edited, "which is nice"—making him the envy of every writer who ever lived.

Reid says he told his editors at the outset that he wanted to write about the human beings underneath those helmets, about characters like McMahon. He wanted to take readers where they couldn't otherwise go.

BIG RED, with his coach-issued khakis and suspiciously similar outfits, never seemed to value style. His writing, even from a limited, long-ago sample size, proves otherwise. It's heavy on metaphors, description and imagery.

For example, here's one lede on an assistant coach: *As the sun rose over the cool Pacific Ocean and the beautiful California coast, a special sea-going creature was missing from the turquoise waters of San Diego Bay . . .*

In Reid's writing, linebackers are "high-tempered people." One older LB in particular is "stocky" in body, with a receding hairline and an "agitated slant of his eye brows, round face and critter-looking mustache . . ."



Over his 12 stories, Reid makes comparisons to *Rocky* and comedian Rodney Dangerfield (twice!). He compares a celebratory game film review session (access!) to hot fudge being poured over vanilla ice cream. (He would, of course, later take his love of food into press conferences all over the country.) Offensive linemen are “seven Greek Gods” and “big bears” who “prowl the high mountains above.” One has a “very honorable bear growl.” Another is “maybe the gentlest bear ever to roam the earth.” Kickers are astronauts, who, “while not touring in orbit,” study accounting. Biceps “can stop oncoming freight trains.” A teammate is “baby-faced” and “prematurely gray.”

An elite lineman, in another story, “looks like a rosy-cheeked incredible hulk as he toys with ferocious defensive linemen.” A defensive end from Hawai‘i is a “hula sacker” and “situated on a 6-5 frame and bonded with grease lightning.” A lack of respect for the big hogs up front requires “an injection of Mom’s tenderness.” That’s a good line!

An elite player in one story “looks like a rosy-cheeked

INCREDIBLE HULK

as he toys with ferocious defensive linemen.”

Reid used his teammates’ and coaches’ nicknames, lending a vibe of familiarity. In one piece, he noted how two linemen once scarfed down 30 baskets of fish and chips in one sitting at Skipper’s Seafood. Good color, as we say.

Typical of all younger writers, his work would benefit from some obvious fixes. Questions posed that go unanswered. Cringe-inducing sentences. Repeated notions. Mixed metaphors. (“This article is dedicated to the Bear wall that makes the star twinkle in the massive, barren sky.” We’ve all been there.) An overreliance on movie metaphors.

For a professional evaluation, I sent his clips to Carl Nelson, an esteemed curmudgeon who ran the *New York Times* sports desk night after chaotic night. Intimidating as hell. Tall. Blunt. Smart. Nobody better. C-Nelz, we called him during my six and a half years with the paper. After reading Reid’s canon, C-Nelz responded how

only he could. For an elite communicator, his emails and text messages are often long strings of thoughts broken up by only a parade of ellipses—teenaged Justin Bieber fan vibes.

His response started with, “Get me rewrite! Or a strong editor . . . haha.”

Then he ramped up the humor. “Dunno whether Andy majored in astronomy or earth science but I read more metaphors Re stars/constellations/boulders/rocks/diamonds/gems than any other sports articles in my 41 years in the newspaper biz. Lotta cliches/overwrought repetition of words to support ledes/themes. Yes Andy the reader gets the point there r lotta gems/stars on the team.” This might have induced some PTSD.

C-Nelz blamed Reid’s editors for any typos that had snuck onto those pages. Nelson also liked Reid’s ideas and the elements he had chosen to construct stories. But he found Reid’s insights lacking in depth in a way that I did not. Since Reid played for the team, C-Nelz expected more of them. Still: “Style was quite readable/no laborious sentences. breezy . . . Overall needed more depth which good editor would insist upon. *I would definitely hire him as an intern!*”

That’s a bar many “real” sportswriters never cleared.

IF YOU READ it closely enough, Reid’s writing provides clues to the career he actually chose. In one story, for instance, he cites the grades for BYU’s offensive line—a full 98% success rate in their previous outing. He counters that with insight into the next opponent, Colorado State, which he notes isn’t a good team but features a strong D-line. That’s a future coach.

In another piece, Reid describes a teammate and the Eagles’ take on him—that he should shift to nose guard, because he was strong. That’s scouting! In the same piece, he also projects a lineman teammate would be a perfect fit with the Chargers and wrote, “his attitude is what makes every coach enjoy his job.” He was already thinking like one, apparently.

Perhaps Edwards, who died in 2016, sensed all this when he approached Reid after his senior season and encouraged him to become a coach. Reid listened and joined the staff as a graduate assistant in 1982. But it’s not like he transformed into an entirely different human. “My players, they’ll probably tell you, I’m a storyteller,” Reid says. “My creativity comes out a little bit, whether calling players or [in] the messages that I don’t want to be stale and repeat.”

One example: In early 2020, before the Chiefs’ win over the 49ers in Super Bowl LIV, Reid took a whiteboard scribble sequence that added a fifth receiver and named the wrinkle Dr. Octopus. All those appendages and whatnot. That’s a story. Same aim, different medium. And the proof is in those newspaper pages, which have now turned a golden shade of yellow, just like the Lombardi Trophy that Reid held overhead last February. □

A full-page background image of Max Verstappen celebrating a victory. He is wearing his Red Bull racing suit and helmet, which is tilted back. The suit is dark with prominent orange and yellow Red Bull branding. The helmet is yellow and black with the Red Bull logo. The background is a bright, fiery orange and yellow, suggesting a celebration or a race scene. The text "POINT AFTER" is in a small, white, sans-serif font. The main title "TO THE MAX" is in a large, white, sans-serif font. The article text is in a white, sans-serif font, with the first letter of the first paragraph being a large "T". The page number and publication information are at the bottom left. The photo credit is on the right side.

POINT AFTER

TO THE MAX

THERE'S A certain irony to the way Max Verstappen clinched his third consecutive Formula One drivers' championship. What had for months been a fait accompli became official in Qatar in October when his Red Bull teammate, Sergio Pérez, crashed out of the Saturday sprint race while the 26-year-old motored home to a second-place finish.

Verstappen's season was arguably the most dominant in F1 history, but the clinching moment came thanks to help (which he

didn't need) in a race—albeit somewhat of a gimmicky one—that he didn't win (a rarity). “Of course it's a fantastic feeling. It's been an incredible year, lots of great races,” said Verstappen. “We'll keep on pushing and try and do the best we can. I'm enjoying the moment. Hopefully we can keep this momentum going for a while.”

The next day Verstappen kept his word. He went out and won the Qatar Grand Prix by nearly five seconds over Oscar Piastri—his 14th victory in the first 17 races of the season. □

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Matthew McConaughey *Stand Up To Cancer Ambassador*
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